

JAMES VRAILLE.



CHAPTER I.

LAW AND LOVE.

THE news spread like wildfire through the garrison. Some said that the colonel had been perfectly right to place him in arrest, others that Vraille was as innocent of the charge as the babe unborn. Opinions were conflicting; but all agreed that a general court-martial would be the inevitable result, and that, if guilty, it would go very hard with the culprit. The cautious presumed that Colonel Dare would never have proceeded to such extremes without good reason, while the sanguine declared that he was a pompous old idiot, and that there was not a shred of evidence against the prisoner. Only one thing was certain, and that was a court-martial.

Colonel Dare himself had no doubt at all as to the rectitude of his own conduct in the matter: he, at any rate, had made no mistake. When the responsibilities of commandant of the station had devolved upon him with all the attendant dignity of the position, he had told his wife that discipline must be maintained, and that he was determined to wheel every stone to try to

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d show once for all that he was a man not to be trifled with. This Captain Vraille had the reputation of being a wild, dissolute young fellow, with no respect for authority ; in fact, a gentleman whose conduct had more than once been the subject of the colonel's comment. He had at last committed a serious offence, and must be made an example of.

"*Pour encourager les autres,*" put in his daughter, Edith Dare, who had been silently listening to her father's remarks. She was barely twenty years of age, so the commandant paid no heed to her flippant French, but kept his eyes fixed upon his wife's placid face as if expecting a reply. Mrs. Dare applauded his resolution in a lady-like way, and languidly agreed to all he said.

"Quite right, my love," she assented ; "and, Edith," she continued, "you had better not dance with Captain Vraille again, if you meet him out anywhere. He is a dissipated young man on his own showing."

"On his own showing?" repeated her husband in a questioning tone.

"I asked him once why his hair was so white."

"Yes?" The colonel was all attention.

"And he whispered in my ear—'Vice, ma'am, vice'!"

"I'll teach him! Edith, what are you laughing at? It is no laughing matter, let me tell you."

"Has he not had long service in India?" asked the girl, "and was he not seriously ill there? Perhaps that may be the cause of his hair being white."

"He distinctly told me it was vice," persisted Mrs.

"India or no India," argued the colonel, "he was drunk when he came into my orderly-room."

"And what will be the result if it is proved he was?" asked his daughter.

"He will probably be cashiered," replied her father sternly, swelling out his chest.

"A great many people declare that he was perfectly sober, father."

"Nonsense, child. I regret to say that he was by no means sober."

"Well," replied his daughter, "all I can say is, that I am sorry you did not give him a chance, as there seems to be so much doubt. I can't help pitying him; it is a terrible punishment."

The colonel began to make some comment on his daughter's remark, but cut himself short by testily adding—"but there, you know nothing of these things."

It is at all times annoying to have one's judgment doubted. Doubt is horribly contagious, especially when impulse is beginning to cool. Not that the colonel for a moment doubted the wisdom of the step he had taken; but to hear others implying even that there was room for doubt was irritating; it made him feel uncomfortable, and he began to wish that he had kept the whole affair to himself, or, at any rate, had only confided in his wife, who always agreed with him in a sensible way instead of arguing about official matters which, of course, she could not, as a woman, be expected to understand.

"I don't believe," continued his daughter after a pause, "that he is half so dissipated as people try to

make out. Now that he is down they are finding out all sorts of things about him which they never knew before. It does not seem fair. He is engaged to a girl in London and that is why he is away so much."

"I cannot listen to tittle-tattle," returned her father, gathering up some papers off a side-table. "I go into court to give evidence on facts, not on hearsay, and my mind must not be biassed one way or the other."

"But you have been listening to a whole lot of things against him from mother."

"Edith, Edith," ejaculated that weary-eyed lady, "how can you speak so to your father on things you know nothing at all about?"

The commandant left the room, saying he wanted an hour's undisturbed quiet in his study to prepare his evidence.

The case excited a good deal of attention, and of course got into the newspapers. In this way James Vraille gained a certain notoriety which some people said he would never have acquired in any other.

In spite of the remonstrances of his friends he refused to allow any one to help him in his defence. "No," he said, when pressed to change his mind, "I will conduct my own case, and it shall be tried on its merits." He refused to make any sort of preparation for his trial, beyond naming half-a-dozen witnesses whom he intended to call; he declined even to read up the law on the subject, saying that military law was not common law, but common sense, and that he knew quite enough about procedure not to make an ass of himself. They begged him at least to protest his innocence in a memorial, which he could lay before

the court in accordance with custom ; but he impatiently declared that he would do nothing of the sort.

Dissipated ! It was a mild term to apply to a man who was supposed to have committed every social enormity under the sun short of a criminal offence. But no two opinions about him seemed to tally. He was reticent and rude, dogmatical and submissive, hilarious and melancholy, bright and dull ; he was everything by turn and nothing long, everything a little and nothing much. Perhaps he was shy, perhaps over-sensitive ; no one seemed to know exactly ; and it would have taken a cleverer man than Colonel Dare to form any true conception of a character containing apparently such conflicting tendencies. Suffice it to say, that the colonel was as capable of sympathising with a man like Vraille as a salamander with a Polar bear.

Unfortunately, perhaps, for Vraille this was not the first occasion on which the colonel had formed an unfavourable impression of him. Colonel Dare, when he stood upon the hearthrug, his legs wide apart, his hands clasped behind his back, his chin on a level with his nose, and a cigar sticking up straight from his face like the funnel of a broad-beamed tug-boat, was a very formidable commandant indeed. On these occasions the amount of information he managed to impart to a knot of idlers, trying to read their newspapers when his eye was not upon them, was extraordinary. It was no use attempting to fix your attention on anything but that voice—you had to hear it—you had to be instructed, whether you liked it or not ; it was part of your duty.

He had been holding forth one day with ponderous exactitude for some time when Vraille, who had been watching him with cold scrutiny and silently taking every word that fell from his lips, suddenly interrupted him in the midst of an anecdote.

"What do you mean?" asked the irritated colonel, puffing out his cheeks like a pair of scarlet air-balloons.

"I mean that, as I happen to know the girl of whom you are speaking and was present, I thought you might not like to disparage a lady to a friend of hers unwittingly."

"Certainly," said the colonel, glowering at his junior, and the subject dropped.

When Vraille's major came to hear of this little episode, he delivered a semi-parental lecture to his prematurely grey young captain, to the effect that no doubt Vraille was perfectly right in the ordinary sense of the word, but that to beard a commanding officer in his own mess was not right; to say the least of it, it was inexpedient, and expediency was the golden rule of the service.

"But I am engaged to marry the girl," protested Vraille. "Am I to listen——"

"My dear fellow, I congratulate you with all my heart, but it would not have hurt either you or the young lady to let old Dare ramble on—he meant nothing by what he said. It's no use kicking against the pricks, you'll only hurt yourself. Expediency, my dear chap, always bear expediency in mind whatever you do, and then it shall follow as the night, etc.—you know the rest."

This was very good advice, and Vraille learnt the

first lesson of many that made him the man he was in after-years. A chance of going on detachment with a draft occurring shortly afterwards, he again found himself listening to the advice of his mentor, and subsequently took charge of the draft.

On the morning of his return to head-quarters, after a night at sea and a long journey by rail, he found on arrival that his orders directed him to report himself to the colonel commanding the station. His baggage was lying about his room in a state approximately chaotic, and his servant was at his wits' end to find his master's things. His gloves wanted pipe-claying, his boots blacking, his sword burnishing; and Vraille started off, breakfastless, rather late, hot, flurried, and worse "turned out" than he had ever been before in his life. Having, as he thought, a minute or two to spare, he rushed into the mess on his way, and, finding the breakfast things all cleared away, drank off a glass of sherry, crammed a biscuit into his mouth, and rushed out again.

Running up the stone steps in front of the colonel's orderly-room door he had the misfortune to trip over his sword and fall. One trouser leg was cut across the knee. With a flushed face and many apologies for his appearance, he presented himself before his superior. Colonel Dare looked at his dusty figure without speaking, and coldly dismissed him. He had heard the clatter of Vraille's fall through the open window; he had noticed his dishevelled state, his halting manner, his flushed face, and had smelt the strong odour of sherry, supposing it to be whisky, which Vraille had brought with him into the room.

The conclusion was obvious, the offence heinous, the retribution swift.

If any one had suggested to the colonel that possibly a pre-existing prejudice had led him to act rather more precipitately than he would have done had Vraille been any other man, he would have indignantly repudiated the idea, and emphatically denied that any motive other than a stern sense of duty had prompted his actions—and he would only have been saying what he fully and conscientiously believed. Had he not the evidence of his senses? Was he blind or deaf? Oh, no; he had done what he had deliberately.

But no one, save his daughter Edith, had put forward any such suggestion. Vraille, meanwhile, was in arrest; his guilt or innocence remained to be proved, and until one or the other was established the stereotyped argument, that there are always two sides to a story, could be freely urged.

The prisoner remained in the same apathetic state, and refused to take any interest in the proceedings. His uncle, the lawyer, came to see him, imploring him to bestir himself and secure the assistance of counsel. As a man of the world, as a lawyer, as an uncle deeply interested in his nephew's cause and the reputation of the family name, Mr. Benjamin Vraille argued with him, and advised him strongly not to rely solely on his own unaided judgment, astutely urging that his very sense of injury might lead him unwittingly into error. But it was all of no avail; Vraille was obstinate in his determination to stand alone. The sting of the whole thing was, he said, that his character as a soldier and a gentleman was impugned. Was the pure-minded girl

he loved to marry a man with the opprobrium of "drink" attached to his name?—and should it ever be in the power of any one to say that he owed his acquittal of such a charge to the astuteness of a lawyer or to some subtle and clever method of defence? No! He had been unjustly accused; he had done nothing to deserve the disgrace of his position, and he could prove his innocence to any intelligent person in five minutes. If there was any justice at all in the system of courts-martial, he was not afraid of the result. The employment of counsel would only lead people to believe that his case wanted careful handling. No; he would take things as they came, and wanted assistance from no one.

"It is not the court-martial itself that I care twopence about," he said bitterly; "it is the injustice that has already been done me. No court-martial can wipe that out. That will always remain the same."

The day of his trial came, and he stood before the court alone; without a note, a written declaration, or any other sign of preparation, save his witnesses. In a firm, confident voice, he pleaded "not guilty" to the charge.

Colonel Dare, the principal witness for the prosecution, stated the circumstances under which the prisoner had visited the orderly-room, swore positively and emphatically that he was then drunk, and summed up the reasons that had led him to this conclusion and to the painful necessity of placing Captain Vraille in arrest. His evidence was then subjected to cross-examination by the prisoner. His answers to the questions put were all duly written down, and, as the

catechism continued, the confidence which had marked his manner during his examination-in-chief, little by little, departed, until somehow the accuser began to look far more uncomfortable than the accused.

"Did Colonel Dare," Vraille asked at last, "send any one after me to confirm his suspicions?"

"Yes."

"What was that officer's report?"

"Sober; but I myself was so certain—" began the colonel.

"I do not wish to ask any more questions!" As Vraille said this he glanced at the witness with a look that brought the blood into the poor colonel's face, dyeing it with deeper flush than it had worn for many a long day.

Six witnesses for the defence followed, and their examination by the prisoner was marked by the extreme simplicity of the questions put, and the carelessness with which the replies were received—a course which rendered the rigidity of Colonel Dare's recent cross-examination all the more apparent. Still, although Vraille's defence was conducted in an apparently slovenly manner, the points elicited were strong and exact. The court was closed to consider its verdict, and opened again almost immediately to declare the prisoner "honourably acquitted" of the charge. Some of the members rose and shook hands with him, but he did not evince any sign of relief, and barely smiled.

Many of his brother officers came into his room to congratulate him, and a few, more observant than the rest, left it convinced that the last fortnight had made

a greater impression than they would have supposed possible on a man who had taken things so philosophically; his very face and figure, to say nothing of manner, seemed to have changed.

When at last he was alone he flung himself into his chair and covered his face with his hands. For the first time in his life he was experiencing the sensation of real hatred.

Luck had never yet in Vraillé's life pointed her fairy finger at him in any unmistakable way; that there was no denying. He had never experienced what is called a real good stroke of luck. Fortunate he was, without doubt; fortunate in his general surroundings and circumstances, in the possession of a sound constitution, robust health, and a not ill-favoured person; fortunate in a hundred-and-fifty ways, but no one had ever called him a lucky man. Fortune and Luck, it seemed to him, were separate and distinct if sister goddesses. It was said that Fortune favoured the brave, but that a scamp escaped detection, a man suddenly acquired wealth, a gambler made a grand *coup*, through Luck. Fortune was proverbially fickle, but she was consistency itself compared to Luck—and Luck chose such extraordinary favourites. Look at old Dare! he had always been a lucky man. Look at himself! Perhaps he had been fortunate to get into the army at all, but there had been no luck about it, only hard work; and, now that he was in, might he not have been luckier had he as a boy started in some other line of life altogether—a lawyer's, for instance, in which his uncle had more than once offered him an opening?

Vraille's reasoning, as he sat thinking out these things, was slightly cynical and not exactly logical, perhaps; but then the balance of his mind had, no doubt, been thrown out of its true adjustment by recent events. But through all the gloom there smiled a lovely face whose radiance dissipated the darkness, and at the thought of it he started to his feet and commenced to pack straightway. Ah, after all, he was the luckiest man in London!

He experienced no difficulty about getting leave. His own commanding officer, the major, who had sympathised with him all through, told him to start at once, and said that he would take upon himself all the responsibility of allowing him to go pending the sanction of his application. The fact was, though every one congratulated him cordially on the result of his trial and declared that it should never have taken place, it was, nevertheless, felt that his immediate departure from the scene of action would be a relief to all concerned. That is the way of the world; the purest suffer from being pelted with mud; and Vraille drove out of the barrack-square with a feeling in his heart that he was not wanted—that, though he had proved himself blameless, still his daily presence in the eyes of his accuser was undesirable; that he had somehow lost caste, and was henceforth a marked man.

With a sense of relief, amounting even to pleasure compared to the mental strain of uncertainty under which he had been labouring for so long, he sank into the cushioned corner of a smoking compartment, lighted a cigar, and began to brood afresh over the

wrong that had been done him. Dare! he would never forget that name as long as he lived. It was branded on his heart. Colonel Dare had set a mark upon him which time would probably obliterate, but the stigma of having been tried would still remain. This was bad enough; but to be labelled through the mistake of a pompous, ignorant, addle-pated old fool, for whom he had never had any other feeling than contemptuous indifference! That such men should be invested with authority and power was disgraceful and preposterous.

In this frame of mind he reached his club, and in an anxious tone inquired at the window of the hall-porter's office if there were any letters awaiting his arrival. When that sedate official had shuffled through the pile he took from a pigeon-hole marked V., and answered in the negative, a look of astonished disappointment crossed Vraille's face, and in a hesitating way, that seemed to be trying to stifle anxiety in affected unconcern, he asked—"No telegram either? I was expecting a telegram." There was none, however; and so, having ordered a room and given directions about his luggage, he sauntered into the smoking-room, and with his hands thrust into his pockets stood moodily looking out of the window, but taking no interest in any of the passers-by except the telegraph boys.

It was a gloriously bright September afternoon, but there was a dissipated look about the street, as if the sun were shining on a scene that had lately been gay and brilliant but was now dreary and desolate—like the morning rays streaming through the open windows on the remains of a night's carouse. Cabs and

hansoms, guided by slackened reins, crawled slowly along the curb, their drivers every now and again lifting their whips questioningly to a likely-looking "fare"; no smart carriages with high-stepping horses rattled past, and even the doctors' broughams did not seem to be in any particular hurry; many of the foot passengers on the pavements were lounging, and others were assuming as best they could the air and demeanour of "passers through"; the roadway itself was torn up and partially barricaded with beams placed on trestles, pitch-caldrons, piles of wooden blocks covered with tarpaulins and other signs of Board of Works repair; a steam-roller rumbled in the distance, and in the windows of the houses opposite hung the spread-out sheets of daily papers. It was an excellent day for a tramp over the turnips after partridges, or for lolling on the sands at the seaside, but a bad one for the club-lounger left in London. The smoking-room was almost deserted.

After looking out of the window for some time, Vraille picked up the first edition of an evening paper, but, finding an account of the result of his trial in it, flung it on to the ground, and again sauntered into the hall. Of course no telegram had arrived in the meantime, or it would have been brought to him; still, he just made the inquiry to make quite sure, and then glanced up at the hall clock. He would wait until four o'clock and no longer.

Four o'clock found him standing on the doorsteps, drawing on his gloves. He was faultlessly attired; the payment of a visit of some importance was evidently his intention. He gave the expected telegram five

minutes' grace, and then jumped into a hansom and drove off westward.

At the door of a neat little house in a quiet street somewhere in the neighbourhood of Cabstand Square, S.W., Vraile knocked and was admitted. He ascended the stairs two at a time, and, in a natty little drawing-room on the first floor, awaited the coming of the girl he was engaged to marry. He waited a long time; but at last the door opened, and before him in all her loveliness stood Lucy Flight—a woman whom men turned round to stare at in the street; a woman on whom nature had bestowed favours with almost too lavish a hand; a woman with the face and figure of a classic goddess, and the colouring of a Rubens' model: "A glorious woman for the stage, by all that's entrancingly histrionic," as Harold Scatter, that well-known connoisseur of forms divine, had feelingly remarked when introduced to her one day at Sandown races. This opinion, however, for some good reason of his own, he did not at the time impart to his friend Vraile; but, carried away with poetic rapture, said airily: "A coiffure of captured sunbeams, my dear fellow; I congratulate you on your conquest." He knew nothing then of Vraile's infatuation—it was before any solemn contract had been sealed and posted for the world to read—but he hazarded his congratulations on the "off chance," he said. On that off chance, he afterwards declared, he was prepared to give long odds, for Miss Lucy had previously put sundry insinuating little questions to him with respect to Vraile, which Harold Scatter, with characteristic astuteness, had answered all together in the one com-

prehensive monosyllable. "Heaps"—an answer that had seemed to give his fair questioner much inward satisfaction.

She was a beautiful woman, truly; and it was a wonder that she had lived for five-and-twenty years to bear no other name at the end of them than Lucy Flight. Besieged in ball-rooms, surrounded at tea-time, the recipient of bouquets and bangles by the score—the favoured idol of picnics, water-parties, regimental race meetings, and, indeed, of all the smaller social functions to which she had the *entrée*—she triumphed in her loveliness and outshone all her compeers.

As she smilingly advanced, Vraille sprang to meet her, and, holding her two hands in his own, looked into her face with eyes expanding as they looked, and flashing with the fire that had gained for them that epithet of wild.

"Why did you not write to my club, as I asked, Lucy?"

"My dear Jim, I've been so very busy lately, you can't think."

"Too busy to telegraph, Lucy? I expected a telegram at least; I waited for one at the club for more than an hour."

"There, there, don't begin by scolding directly you come to see me; but give me a kiss and forgive me for forgetting. You came without the telegram, so there's no harm done, after all. Come, don't bear malice, Jim; give me a kiss and make it up."

For answer he wound his arms about her, and, catching her to him, kissed her passionately again and

again, until she pleaded for mercy. Reluctantly he loosed his arms and let her go. Then hand in hand they sat upon a sofa, and began to talk, as Lucy said, sensibly.

"And what have you been doing with yourself all this time, you naughty boy, never to come and see me?"

"I have been in arrest in my quarters—I told you," he answered, dropping her hand and turning his head away.

"But you did not say what for."

He did not answer at once; he was biting his under lip and tugging at the end of his moustache.

"I was court-martialled this morning for drunkenness," he said at last, abruptly; then, rising from his seat, he walked across the room to the window opposite, and stood looking out of it—with his back to her.

"Oh," she cried, "that's very dreadful, but very interesting all the same. Come and tell me all about it. What do you walk away like that for?"

"I did not wish you to know until I could tell you myself," he said slowly. "I wrote to Mrs. Flight and asked her to keep the papers from you if she could."

All through his troubles two certainties amid a sea of doubts had sustained and buoyed him up—the certainty of his uncle's unflinching belief in his innocence, and the certainty of Lucy's sympathy, whichever way the tide would turn, when he told her all.

"I very seldom read the papers, except the *Queen* and the *Morning Post* sometimes; there was nothing about you in either of them, that I saw."

He turned sharply round and took a step towards her.

"Lucy, Lucy, do you care? Do you know what a court-martial means? Have you nothing to say?"

"Yes, Jim, of course I have—I have a great deal to say. You were always a wild, dissipated wretch—as wild as a hawk they told me—but I don't mind that. I like a man to be a little wild—it makes him interesting—I hate a milksop. That is why I always liked you, I suppose. But you can be wild and naughty without being tried by court-martial."

"I am *not*," he exclaimed passionately; "I am *not* wild! If you like to call it wild, I was wild once—that is, I used to do what every one else did. Oh, yes, I was wild enough in that sense—I gambled, I raced, I backed bills, I hunted, I spent more money than I could afford, I drank and smoked more than I ought, I behaved like the usual idiot; but I might as well have cheated at cards, swindled book-makers, suffered from delirium tremens half my life, and been put in jail for shop-lifting—give a dog a bad name and hang him—my reputation now is much the same, and I am dissolute and wild!" In his excitement he half stretched out his hands before him, in a way that was partly indignant, partly suppliant, but wholly piteous; then changing his manner, and lowering his tone, he continued, in a different, softened strain. "Lucy," he said, seating himself beside her again and taking her hand, "you know that I have given up all that; you know that I promised you I would that day, although you did not ask me for any promise; you know, or you ought to know, that I have kept my promise from that day to this."

Her face as she listened to him flushed slightly with

the keenness of her pleasure. Jim was in one of his adorably passionate moods, when she felt most of all that she really loved him. His admiration of her always seemed to her then so far more intense and sincere than any other man's with whom she had ever flirted to pass away the time.

"My darling Jim," she said softly, "you look so handsome when you speak like that. Why did you give up all your pleasures for me, dear?"

"I knew no real pleasure till I met you, Lucy, or pain either."

"But why did you give up your—your pursuits, then?" she persisted, insinuating the soft hand he released as he flung his arm round her waist into his other hand which rested on his knee.

"Because from the first moment I saw you I was changed. I could think of nothing day and night but your sweet face; it haunted me awake and asleep—your eyes were always looking at me. After I had seen you once, I went everywhere to meet you—oh, you know, you know it all," he broke off; "I have told it you a hundred times before."

"Tell me again, Jim; I love to listen."

"Yes, but does telling make you understand?"

"Of course I understand."

"I think you will in time," he said softly, half to himself. "My ambition is attained, the only one I ever really had."

"Yes, dear, you have won."

Vraille wondered in his heart if he had in very truth conquered, and at first felt tempted to inquire: "What if I had been found guilty to-day, and were soon to be

turned out of the army in disgrace?" but put that thought away as an unworthy thing.

"I am honourably acquitted," he said.

"Ah! I am so glad." She looked what she said, and sighed.

He turned to her, and, taking her face between his hands, gazed silently into her eyes as if to read in their blue depths the verdict that he had been too great a coward to listen to in words. Reassured apparently by what he saw, he bent his head and kissed her.

"It has often crossed my mind to ask you something, Lucy," he said in a deep thick voice, "but I have never had the courage. Do you ever repent your promise to me? If there is a shade of doubt in your mind about the step you are about to take, tell me, and I will leave you. I will never trouble you again. I will not promise a whole lot of things about everlasting constancy and such nonsense, but you shall hear of me no more. I have a chance—a desire, I mean—of going to India, right away from you. I can take it now better than at another time. Shall I?"

"No," she said, without a moment's hesitation, "unless you take me with you. But I have a horror of India; neither of us need go, surely."

CHAPTER II.

ENGAGEMENTS.

THE whole duty of man is complex and manifold; the whole duty of Mrs. Flight was simple and twofold. The main objects of her existence were to chaperon her daughter and to study contemporary history and politics. Between these two occupations she divided her time, regarding the one as a duty tinged with pleasure, the other as a pleasure tinged with duty: she hated balls and parties, but liked to know what was going on in Lucy's immediate vicinity; she hated Mr. Gidstone, but took the keenest interest in all he said and did.

She was a quaint little old lady to be the mother of such a splendid creature as Lucy Flight; but society did not trouble itself much about the chaperon in its devotion to her beautiful charge, and only imagined, if it gave the subject a thought at all, that the beauty's father must have been a singularly handsome man. During the lifetime of that legal luminary (then second partner of the eminent firm, Bite, Flight & Co., of which Mr. Bite junior was the Co. in waiting), his wife had enjoyed the luxuries of a very comfortable income, but at his death little but the mantle of his astuteness had fallen on his widow.

Mrs. Flight was a shrewd woman, and, by keeping

the accounts of her little house near Cabstand Square always slightly in debt, she was enabled to provide herself with all the political literature of the day and her daughter with fashionable amusement and well-executed ball-dresses. But as time went on and the tide of political print seemed to be always on the flood, while the receding focus of the old lady's vision set in steadily on the ebb, Mrs. Flight found it more and more difficult to keep abreast of the times, and began to wish with all her heart that Miss Lucy would secure the services of a permanent chaperon for life and buy her own ball-dresses; she wanted to tuck her toes up on the fender, eschew frivolity, curtail expense, and read in peace for the remainder of her days. Lucy's engagement to Vraille, was, therefore, a subject of calm gratification to Mrs. Flight, and she was on all occasions that gentleman's strong ally.

"My dear Lucy," she said on the day succeeding Vraille's visit, "it is positively irritating to hear you talk in the way you have been doing about the colour of a man's hair, when everything else about him is all that a girl could want,—and, if you don't like his hair, you can dye it easily enough after you are married. But I should leave it alone if I were you. Look at his beautiful brown eyes and moustache,—the very contrast makes him handsome to my mind. Besides, beggars can't be choosers, Lucy, and we are practically beggars."

"That's not my fault," put in Lucy.

"Yes, it is; this last season of yours has nearly finished us, and here we are, obliged to stay in London when the very tradespeople are all at the seaside. Not

that *I* mind much, for, when you're married, I shall live on here in peace, except for a trip now and again during the recess to the Buxton Wells."

"It's this idea of India I don't like," said Lucy, pouting her pretty lips and contracting her fair brow. "He is bent on going back to India."

"He was very ill there before," said Mrs. Flight grimly. "Take comfort from that fact, if you won't from any other."

Nothing in her daughter's face showed that she resented or even appreciated the significance of her mother's retort as she placidly continued: "The prospect of being exiled in a wild country, with a sick husband, is not particularly pleasant, you must allow."

"Exiled? wild?—nonsense, child! You are five-and-twenty; you have had your chances and missed them. I don't wish to say anything harsh, but to put it mildly, my dear, you are not clever; and though, perhaps, you might have managed matters better once, you certainly won't now. And you have nothing whatever to grumble about; you ought to consider yourself an exceedingly lucky girl. You like society, you'll have plenty; you love admiration, you need not be afraid of that falling off for another dozen years, at least; you hate thought, and books, and politics, you're going to leave them behind you. What more do you want?"

Lucy never quite understood her mother, and had learnt from experience that little was to be gained by argument or contradiction: She contented herself by changing the subject and taking no notice of these equivocal compliments.

"He wants me to go and see his uncles and aunts and things," she said.

"Of course he does; he would not be the man he is if he didn't. Go and see them, and don't make a fool of yourself. Your best chance of not doing so is to say as little as possible; rely on your looks, my dear—rely on your looks, and you won't go far wrong. Any good-looking woman can win a man, but it takes a clever one to keep him, so mind what you are about;" and the little lady chuckled to herself as if pleased at her own remarks. After a pause she continued:—

"Ah, your father was a clever man, and I'm no fool; your sisters took all the brains and left you all the looks, and yet they married first; and, now that I think of it, let me give you a little piece of gratuitous advice. If you want to win a man's heart, let him talk as much as ever he likes about himself and listen, especially when his heart is sore; don't drag him off to a theatre instead, as you did Jim last night."

"He wanted to go."

"Did he?" asked Mrs. Flight, in a tone that implied "he did nothing of the sort."

"Certainly he did."

"Did he suggest it?"

"No, not exactly."

"I thought not; let *all* suggestions come from him for a time."

"Oh, I shall be all right, mother, never fear," said Lucy languidly, stretching her beautiful figure at full length on the sofa and stifling a yawn. "He is very much in love with me—very much indeed, I think—and talks about our being married at once."

"Agree to that," said Mrs. Flight tartly.

"He's coming to lunch, you know—I asked him—and he's going to take me out afterwards."

"Go about with him as much as ever you like, my dear, only remember what I have told you. Be careful—there's many a slip, etc., even when the lip is as pretty as yours."

Lucy promised to be careful with an air of assurance, as if confident in the power of her charms unaided by any care; and then they discussed Vraille's recent court-martial in all its bearings. Mrs. Flight said that it was a trump card in her daughter's hand, properly held and properly played. Lucy said she fancied it was a disgrace any way, but that she supposed Jim did not drink; she hoped not, for her own sake. They then chatted about the position of affairs generally until Vraille came in to lunch.

He was as radiant as a sallow-complexioned, grey-haired young man could be, with a flower in his button-hole, brightly shining boots, and a brand-new silk hat. He brought a present for Lucy with him, a spray of gardenias and maiden-hair, which he presented with shy gallantry. She held the flowers to her delicate nostrils, looking up at him with her grand eyes as she did so, and smiled her gratitude.

Luncheon was devoted to an animated discussion on the Irish question, in which Lucy did not join. Mrs. Flight argued, declaimed, and apostrophised to her heart's content. Vraille rather enjoyed hearing her talk, for her remarks were much to the point and she knew her subject; but Lucy made an early pretext for escape, and her face wore a weary expression until

Vraille brought to the door the patentest of patent hansoms he could find in Cabstand Square.

They drove to Bond Street, where he bought his fiancée an emerald and ruby ring, just to see, as he explained, the size of her finger, so that the awkward necessity of having it measured for a plainer ornament later on might be avoided. Then they walked to the National Gallery, the only exhibition of pictures in London which Lucy had never seen. Here Vraille told her stories of the scenes and incidents represented in the pictures, while she held the catalogue and listened. He was a mine of information, and told her a hundred things of which the catalogue contained not a single word. He had spent hours in the gallery as a boy, he said, and his childish fancy had attached stories to some of the men and women in the pictures, especially to the less important figures of the larger canvases, which he had never afterwards been wholly able to forget; some particular faces—and he pointed out one or two to her—always seemed to look at him with kindly recognition when he entered the room in which they hung, as if they were old friends welcoming him back to their society. And in a sense they were old friends; he knew them so well that his interest in them always drew his attention away from the other faces surrounding them, and, in some cases, their stories—the stories, that is, that he himself had made up about them—were more familiar to him than even the central idea of the picture itself. Half laughingly he outlined the past histories of a man here and a woman there, or connected the lives of a boy in one picture and a girl in another, and sketched their futures until he brought

them together living happily in a third. He traced the sequence of events that changed the child sitting on its mother's knee in one room into the boy riding on a pony in the next, and so on, from room to room, from boyhood to manhood, from manhood to old age.

"That is the last time we see him," he said, pointing to a figure in the background of a group. "There he is, standing on one side, frowning slightly and taking no part in the action of the scene. All through his life it has always been the same," Vraille continued, speaking as earnestly as if the story he was telling were the actual history of the man; "we have always seen him standing on one side, taking, apparently, but little interest in what is going on, neither helping nor hindering those about him, but just standing aloof, thinking. Though every one knows him, he is not a person of any particular importance, and if he does or says anything it is just what any one of those about him might do or say; and of course he is judged by his actions and speech. To the outer world he is just as we see him there—unimportant without being insignificant; interesting, perhaps, but in no way remarkable. He knows all this; he knows his character in the eyes of the world well enough; he can judge himself as easily as others can. But that man is not he; he is always living two lives—one in the world, one in himself. He, in some strange sense which he cannot understand, stands by seeing and hearing that man say and do things, and judging him like any one else. He himself—the himself that no one knows or ever will know—without necessarily condemning that man's actions, is powerless to control them, and without the

desire to alter the words in his mouth listens to him as he might to any other fellow being. I suppose we are all more or less like that man. Oh, often and often"—he exclaimed, taking his eyes off the picture and looking at the beautiful face beside him—"often and often have I felt that I am some other person than myself, looking out on myself, judging myself, and yet helpless to alter myself. Often in speaking to any one I feel I am standing by listening to that creature whom the world identifies with me, but who is no more me than the person he is talking to. I can't explain myself better, and, of course, you cannot understand?"

There was a question in his tone though none in his remark, and he looked at his companion as if hoping for, rather than expecting, an answer; but none came.

"Of course not—not yet," he said. "But sometimes I have thought, Lucy, that two people might learn to know each other, in course of time, so intimately that even that secret self—which is not conscience, for conscience need not be secret—might be mutually revealed and blended in the spirit."

Lucy thought that perhaps what he said was possible, but was absolutely certain that it was high time for them to be going, for "the days were shortening wonderfully," and "winter would be upon them before they knew where they were;" the evening was fast drawing in, and he had promised to take her to Charbonnel and Walker's for a cup of chocolate before going home. Vague ideas of delirium tremens were possibly flying through fair Lucy's mind when she asked Vraille thoughtfully the nature of his illness

in India : had he had a sunstroke ever, she wanted to know ?

“ A sunstroke ! no ; whatever made you think of India and sunstrokes just now ? ”

“ Oh, nothing particular ; they came into my head, that’s all.”

She told her mother afterwards of the strange way in which Vraille had talked in the gallery, and wondered whether he had a tile loose, or a B in his bonnet, or some such unpleasantness ; she hoped not, for her own sake. Her mother only laughed and said that, if Lucy were going to suspect every one who said things she could not understand of madness, she might as well take it for granted at once that the world was a large lunatic asylum.

As a memento of their conversation Vraille bought her one or two engravings which only cost him four or five guineas, and then they drove back to Bond Street for the chocolate, stopping at his club on the way that he might cash a cheque.

“ You seem very fond of pictures, Jim,” she said, as she sat alternately sipping and stirring her chocolate ; “ do you paint yourself ? ”

He laughed. “ A little,” he said ; “ like everything else I do—a little. I amuse myself by drawing sometimes ; I always had a taste that way.”

“ You don’t caricature, I hope.”

“ No ; I can’t, or else perhaps I might.”

Lucy was glad. She hated caricaturists, she said, and the kind of people who made fun of one ; but she would like him to draw a picture of herself, or paint one, which would be better still : “ a nice one,” she

pleaded; "do paint my picture, Jim, do. I'll sit as still as still."

"I could not, Lucy; I would not try, for anything. But I'll have your picture done for you by some one who can do you justice, if you like. Come with me to-morrow morning and we'll make an appointment."

Lucy was delighted. "You dear old Jim," she exclaimed; "yes, I'll come with you to-morrow, certainly. Oh, that's better than all the pictures in the National Gallery, isn't it?"

And so it was arranged, and they drove home together in high spirits, Lucy with the "lovely box of bonbons" which Jim had given her on her lap and one hand clasped in his.

It was a long way to Cabstand Square, and by the time Vraille had seen Lucy home, driven back to his club, changed into evening clothes and returned, it was past the usual Flight dinner hour and his hostess was rather cross. But, as the little lady in the course of the afternoon had remembered a serious complication which she had quite overlooked at lunch, she speedily regained her good humour in discussing it with Vraille. She talked well, and thoroughly enjoyed hearing herself talk; and a man who listened attentively, as if he understood and appreciated what she said, and who, moreover, every now and again put in intelligent remarks of his own, was a godsend to her; she delighted in a sensible discussion, as she called it, with her future son-in-law.

But she was not the woman to overlook her daughter's interests; she was a thoughtful mother and a discreet chaperon, and, once back in the drawing-room, she

settled herself in her easy-chair with a 'Blackwood' on one knee and a 'Nineteenth Century' on the other, and silently compared their opposing views. Lucy, who was famed for her sweet contralto, sang song after song to her lover as he selected them, was languishing and lovable, and seen at her very best, Vraille thought, as he turned over the leaves of her music and drank in every note. Mrs. Flight, meanwhile, turned over the leaves of her magazines, and, lulled by the soft music, gradually lost sense of her surroundings and fell asleep.

Then the pair behaved themselves as young people in such circumstances usually do behave, and presently, after sundry love passages of a very tender and strictly confidential nature, began by slow and sweet degrees to descend from heaven to earth, and in murmuring voices to discuss their future prospects. They needed discussing, for Vraille said that his recent court-martial had upset all his plans.

"I hate the idea of serving under that man again," he whispered, a thrill in his tone giving the whisper a harsh quivering sound; "it will be impossible to get on with him. I despise him, and he knows it."

"But surely, Jim," she murmured back, "there are other places to serve in beside India? Is it necessary to go to India? I do so dread the idea," and she shuddered.

He comforted her, and then answered: "It all depends upon what exchanges may be open. I am going to see a man called Skrim, an agent, about an exchange to-morrow morning."

"You won't forget about taking me to the photographer's about my picture?"

"No, no, I'll not forget. I shall have lots of time to see Skrim first."

"I'll meet you at the shop door."

"Yes; and then I can tell you what I've done."

"And be sure, Jim, you get a nice little English station."

"I'll do the very best I can for your sweet sake; and I'll promise to decide nothing without first telling you."

"It seems a dreadful pity that you should have to move at all, when you were so comfortable where you are," said Lucy despondently; she had found Vraille's present station a very attractive place on more than one occasion, and had quite looked forward to settling down in it altogether.

Her words opened the old sore and it bled afresh. "Oh, the infinity of mischief done by folly!" he exclaimed in a gust of passion, throwing himself back in his seat. "Fools do more harm in the world than knaves, Lucy, I verily believe. But for the work of a fool we might have married and settled down where I am without a thought of India. I do not like taking you to the scene of my arrest and trial. Let us start afresh—altogether afresh; and let me wipe out the disgrace of it all by my own action, my endeavour, by hard work, and so make for myself a future that will do me credit. I will—I will some day; and you shall help me."

He explained to her how ambition had sprung out of his sense of injury; how a new purpose had been grafted into his life; how henceforth he intended to live with the one great object in view of raising him

self high above the heads of such men as Colonel Dare, and refuting in a practical way the charges that had been falsely brought against him. But with all his fire and enthusiasm he failed to kindle in Lucy's eyes the same glow of animation that had shone there the day before, when he told her that she, Lucy Flight, had been the unconscious instrument that had wrought such changes in his mode of life. This other incitement to reform was not half so interesting as the first; in it she took no part; it reflected no credit upon herself, and that was what she liked to hear about.

"I have told no one but you of my determination," he concluded; "no one but you would take the trouble to try and understand it. From you I have no secrets; and you—you will understand, I know."

Yes, Lucy understood, of course, but at the same time she could not see why all these things could not be effected without going to India. Why not stay comfortably at home and do them? That was what she could not understand.

This was natural, and Vraille, only too happy to enlarge upon the subject, explained: India was the country for a soldier who wished to get on; he had done a good deal of service in India, and he was known there; he would pass an examination in Hindustani and qualify for an interpretership; chances and opportunities were occurring every day in India; it was the land of enterprise. But, since she wished it, he would willingly stay at home—it did not matter much.

Mrs. Flight here suddenly woke up and declared she had heard every word he had been saying. "India! enterprise!" she exclaimed, sitting bolt upright in her

chair; "it means war; I feel certain of it. It is the land of wars—the land of swords and soldiers. It always must be so: '42 and Brydon are coming all over again, as sure as Gladstone—but that is not exactly what we were talking about, is it?" she broke off rather feebly.

Vraille had not told Lucy half of what he wished to say—much was on his mind to pour forth to her, and he looked upon Mrs. Flight's awakening as unfortunately premature. Her remarks, too, were inopportune; he had carefully avoided mentioning the possibilities of war to Lucy for fear of frightening her needlessly. However, it was past eleven, and there was no help for it but to go.

He walked in the direction of his Club with the depressing feeling that his heart was overloaded; that in the act of disburdening it he had been interrupted, so that it was still full to overflowing. It was not the first time he had experienced the feeling after a day spent in the society of his inamorata; but in this instance, he told himself, the fault lay solely with her mother.

At the club he met Scatter, young Careless, and one or two others, who asked him to join them in a midnight grill, Harold Scatter adding the suggestion that they should all drink health to Benedicts and confusion to old Dare.

Readily enough Vraille accepted the invitation, and in a few minutes was transformed from the moody sentimental lover into the gay and careless knockabout whom people were so ready to call dissipated. He could not help it; it was his nature to be happy;

society and genial companionship were meat and drink to him; he was the jolliest of the party, and all his troubles and anxieties were drowned and smothered in stout and devilled kidneys. About 2 A.M. he sauntered home to his lodging. The empty streets, the cold night air, and finally his dreary bedroom, struck his hilarity with a succession of chills, and down, down, down sank his spirits, until, by the time he was between the sheets, doubts and fears, misgivings and self-accusations, helped him to hear the clocks strike three and four before he fell asleep.

Mr. Skrim was a round little shiny-faced old gentleman, whose figure and general appearance suggested the idea of a rosy-cheeked apple; and yet he was the means of shaping the ends of many a rough-hewn destiny, and a fairly sharp instrument for the purpose. A genial, smiling factor in the futures of many of his fellow men—a bland and unctuous personification of fate, was Mr. Skrim. He offered Vraille a seat in a low confidential voice.

At first it seemed that there would be no difficulty in arranging matters to the applicant's entire satisfaction; numbers of gentlemen would give anything to step into Captain Vraille's shoes, and were only waiting for such a chance to snap it up at once. But some of them, it turned out on inquiry, were stationed in the Bermudas or the Mauritius, others were expecting to sail to Hong-Kong or Singapore at a moment's notice, while others again were uncertain whether their next move would be to Aden or Ceylon. No officers were desirous of leaving the United Kingdom, except one,

who had intimated a willingness to go anywhere so long as he got two thousand pounds for going there.

"Now, if you would take a nice Indian station," said Mr. Skrim, in his soft, purring voice, "we could fit you out at once; give you your choice, in fact, of three or four charming places."

"I don't want India," said Vraille, hoarsely, trying to look as if he meant what he said.

"There's Ghoojeram, Ransidnugger, Jujabpoor," said Mr. Skrim, running his finger down a list before him and paying no heed to Vraille's objections. "You see," he continued persuasively, leaning back in his chair and tossing his spectacles up on to his forehead, "exchanges are so easily arranged for you artillery officers; you have only to say the word and you can go to any part of the world you like."

"It doesn't seem so," said Vraille, ruefully.

"And I should think," continued Mr. Skrim, hitching his thumbs into the armholes of his waistcoat, "that an officer would go almost anywhere sooner than serve under Colonel Dare."

"Come, that's no business of yours," said Vraille, hotly.

"No, no," returned Mr. Skrim in, no way put out; "no business of mine, of course; but *I* know, *I* know Captain Vraille, and I must say I pity your successor. By the way, have you ever met Major Bunce? Charming man! you would like him immensely—immensely; his captain is at home on sick leave, looking out for an exchange. That's the Ghoojeram battery—the pleasantest station in India."

"I tell you I don't want to go to India. I want to stay at home"

"Then," said Mr. Skrim, changing his tactics, "you must come to me again in three months' time. There will be any amount of opportunities then."

"You think there will be war?"

"In three months," Mr. Skrim replied, careful as usual not to commit himself, "men will be flocking to India and paying through the nose to get there; as it is, no money is passing for exchanges between India and good home stations."

"Ah!" sighed Vraile; Mr. Skrim's insinuations were having their effect.

"Don't decide immediately, Captain Vraile, leave the matter in my hands. I will make every inquiry and let you know the result. Kindly leave me your address. Doubtless I shall be able to get you exactly what you want. Should you change your mind about India, of course you will let me know—by telegram would be best. Good morning;" and Mr. Skrim bowed his client out of one door, ringing his bell to let his clerk know that the other was at the next apartment's disposal.

Vraile's first feeling as he stepped into the room was one of keen and bitter disappointment. He had jumped at Mr. Skrim's offer, accepted the exchange to Ghent, not for his own sake, but for no one's wishes but his own.

but Lucy's abhorrence

of the thought

old

and football

and it only and boys'

the rough boys called

a loud and large voice, and

such as they did. But when

six minutes late, but he was before her, and glad to find he had not kept her waiting. He paced the pavement up and down, thinking, and struggling to put Ghoojeram out of his thoughts.

At last Lucy came, radiant and smiling as the morning. In a moment his sombre thoughts were dissipated. The sight of her bewitching loveliness sent a glow of gladness through his heart, and illumined his face as he hurried to meet her with pride and pleasure.

She was sorry to have kept him waiting, but the morning had slipped away without her noticing the time. She was full of enthusiasm about the proposed photograph, and without more ado hurried into the shop. Should it be a panel or a cabinet? Which would look best painted on china? Was there a larger size? Should she be taken in walking or evening costume? She favoured evening. She did not inquire so particularly as to Vraille's wishes as his opinions.

An appointment for the following day was at last ^{under} finally arranged, and all minor details settled, when Vraille took her to the Grand Hotel for lunch. Miss Lucy ^{came} was hungry, and enjoyed the good things set before her. She was a healthy, sensible woman; but Vraille talked so eagerly ^{min} that he ate but little. He recapitulated all the minutiae of his morning's interview, and again and again expressed his regrets for having been unable to settle matters, as he had hoped to do, to her satisfaction.

"I am so sorry, Lucy," he said, before ^{good} good-bye, "I had nothing definite to tell you, that your anxiety might be at an end. It is not fair to you, I know; but indeed I cannot help myself."

She was not down-hearted, however, and encouraged him with assurances that something would be sure to turn up.

“We shan’t go to India, I feel certain,” she said, giving him her hand out of the cab window; “and you won’t forget the photographer to-morrow. You will come for me in plenty of time, won’t you?”

CHAPTER III.

UNCLE BEN.

THE younger Pitt took after his father; but, for the most part, talent, character, propensities and such-like things skip a generation, like the gout. Parsons' sons often turn out wicked, and a pedagogue's children generally hate books. James Vraille's father was, or rather had been when he was alive, a doctor of divinity and a head schoolmaster, so that by the law of averages James Vraille was heavily and doubly handicapped from the day that he first started on the race of life. He made a bad start. At school he was always in trouble, and did very little work—no more than he could possibly help, in fact. He brought home plenty of silver challenge-cups, presentation cricket bats, and "first fifteen" football jerseys, but his prizes were conspicuous for their absence, and his reports for them "very indifferents."

He did not always enjoy his holidays, and never unless his Uncle Ben was staying at Orleigh with his ^{as} other the Doctor, which, luckily for Master Jim, very ^{unab} satisfaction. ^{happened} to be the case; for Uncle Ben naturally

"I am so sorry, L for his visits, and was pretty regular good-bye, "I had nothing Christmas a certainty. Between anxiety might be at an ^{existed} an undefined affinity. know; but indeed I cannot help ^{ends}, and many a time had ^{her} between the boy and

his father. While it remained an understood thing in the family that Jim would some day be taken into partnership by the old lawyer, the boy continued to be as idle as ever; but when the subject of the army as a profession had been broached by the young scamp himself, indignantly discussed, and finally settled, he suddenly began to work. The Doctor was disgusted at his son's decision, but Uncle Ben quoted the family motto, *Nosce teipsum*, and declared that the lad should be allowed to follow his own inclinations.

Children remember little things, and hide them in their hearts. Sometimes the impression made by some trivial occurrence in childhood is retained through life. James Vraile never forgot the first (and only) prize he gained at school. With the prospect of a commission as an incentive, he began to read, mark, learn, and pay attention. It was uphill work; he had a lot of lost ground to cover before he could start fair. But he got on and got up. For three terms in succession he was beaten by the same boy. At last he won the class prize over that boy's head, and carried it wrapped in tissue paper all the way from the school-house door to his own home under his arm rather than trust it to the vicissitudes of his portmanteau in the luggage-van. He took it into his father's study and gave it into his father's hand. The Doctor, himself a schoolmaster with a high reputation as a classic, praised him and patted him on the shoulder, and, after turning over the leaves of the volume carelessly, placed it on the boys' table, remarking in a ruminating tone that though boys called experience he had come to the end and large voice, and were, after all, a poor test as they did. But wher-

competition was not a sound thing in principle. He was glad, however, to see that his son was doing well in mathematics; it was not a study he knew much about; but of course he was glad.

Every detail of that interview stood out clear in Vraille's memory whenever he thought of his school days. He could see the pained expression of the boy's face as he left the room. He could see him pitch the book into a drawer in his little bedroom, where it lay, wrapped in its tissue paper, untouched from that day forward until it was sold in a job lot at the auction that had succeeded his father's death.

He failed to get into the army at his first attempt; he was not a clever man like his father, who wrote treatises on Juvenal and Thucydides, and books of all sorts about ancient old gentlemen for the edification of modern young ones. Perhaps he would have done better had he not tried again, but then and there accepted his uncle's renewed offer and become a lawyer. His father took no interest in a career of which he knew nothing; the little ambitions, difficulties, and annoyances of a soldier's life were paltry things to him compared to the importance of a Greek root or the significance of a Latin derivation. He cared for no soldiers but Cæsar and Hannibal and Xenophon; he did not understand the matter of allowances, and kept his son short of money and well in hand. But *de*

his—

his wife soon followed him; his second good childhood, and his daughters were all anxiety ^{into} his money, and, like a duckling know; but in ^{the} the precepts and example of

its foster-mother, rushed headlong into pleasures; and he thoroughly enjoyed himself. He enjoyed himself for a good long time longer than most men, for he had arrears to make up. However, he had at last found some one beside Uncle Ben to take an interest in what he did; and after ascending the well-known stairs two at a time, he knocked at that lawyer's office door with a knock a great deal heavier than his heart.

"Come in!" roared a lusty voice from the inside; and Vraille obeyed.

"Hallo, Jim, my boy! I might have guessed it was you by the infernal row you made," said Uncle Ben; "you cost me a new panel every time you come here—you and your beastly artillery. But come in now you are here, and shut what's left of the door; I'm not so fond of draughts as I was. Sit down over there out of the way, and I'll attend to you in one minute. Here, here's a cigar; it'll keep you quiet."

Vraille did as he was told, and sat tapping the toe of his patent leather boot with his stick and puffing his cigar, which was a good one, while Uncle Ben went on with his writing.

Seated at his desk, he looked like a man whose words and ways and thoughts were all perfectly legal and nothing else—an unbending, uncompromising, matter-of-fact, six-and-eightpenny parchment sort of man. But Jim knew better. He remembered him in the old days at Orleigh Grammar-school, looking on at football or cricket, and taking much interest in boys and boys' ways. "The false quantity," the Orleigh boys called him, because of his little person and large voice, and he enjoyed the joke as much as they did. But wher-

ever he was, or whatever he did, he was healthy and happy, brisk and business-like, sonorous and shrewd—wonderfully shrewd, “the family” thought—difficult to defeat in argument, difficult to gainsay, easy to get on with, but not always easy to understand. He had no breadth to make up for want of height, except from ear to ear. His bald head seemed to be all forehead; but his little legal whiskers, deep-set twinkling eyes and beetling eye-brows made ample amends for the dignity that another cubit of stature might have added to his appearance. The family, his clients, and his nephew respected him.

“Well, Jim,” he said presently, swinging himself round in his swivel chair, and facing his nephew with a face changed as much as an actor’s after the falling of the curtain, “you were right not to employ counsel in your case, after all. *Nosce teipsum, nosce teipsum*; you are a real Vraille.”

As eldest surviving member of the family, Mr. Benjamin Vraille of Bedford Row was rather proud of the distinction of representing it in his person. The Vrailles, he said, had “come over at the Conquest,” and their motto had been conferred by the great William himself upon a hitherto unknown Norman who had saved the Conqueror’s life at Hastings. The words bore a double significance. The Vrailles had “known themselves” from that time forth. “Know thyself,” Uncle Ben construed as meaning “know thy own mind.” He always knew *his* own mind, and expected other people to know theirs.

Jim said that it did not take counsel to see through wanton injustice, and pulled hard at his cigar.

"Aye, but it isn't every man would have the pluck to stand up alone against the quibbles of the law; and that same piece of injustice, by the looks of you, seems to have pulled you down a bit, eh?"

"Yes," said Jim, shortly.

"But don't you go taking things more seriously than they're worth. It's a way you have, I'm afraid. Meet 'em; and, if you can, defeat 'em; but don't worry about 'em afterwards. It's all over now, and well over. You showed the stuff you were made of for about the first time since I've known you, though I always knew you had it in you. You knew your own mind, my boy, and I was proud of you."

Vraille said something about common sense and uncommon nonsense, and explained at some length the freedom of military law from quibbles; and then they began talking about prospects and futures, and altered states and circumstances, and family affairs, until they got at last to Mr. Skrim.

"Hang me," said Uncle Ben, emphatically, "if I can see the sense of exchanging. It looks like pique—as if you were ashamed to go back."

"My coming away was a relief to everybody," Jim replied.

That was just it; he knew that every one had felt relieved when his cab had fairly passed the sentry at the gate, and he felt that, consequently, every one would be sorry to see his cab return. It did not follow; but he had only his own feelings to judge other people's by.

"No reason why you should stay away altogether—run away like a whipped cur."

It was a hard expression, and Vraille's face flushed.

"I'm not *afraid* of Dare," he said angrily, "however much I may hate him."

"Don't hate, my boy; it's never worth while."

"Well, despise him then."

"That'll do you no good, either. I don't like Colonel Dare any better than you do; but in your place I should go back and meet him as if nothing had happened. That strikes me as the manly thing for you to do."

It struck Jim—struck him as a "facer," he said; he had never looked at the matter in that light before; he had only thought that his position under Dare would be intolerable both for himself and Lucy.

"Oh, sentiment be—— laid aside for a moment," said the old gentleman. "If I thought an exchange was the right thing, I'd give you a couple of thousand for one to-morrow; but I don't. You've been bucketing about all over the place for Lord knows how long—not that I ever thought the worse of you for your pranks—and, now that you're upset all of a sudden, your judgment is unsettled. You'll think as I do in a week's time, if you don't let your affections get the upper hand of you."

"I never knew I had any—until lately."

"I did; and I knew they'd find you out some day. Your father used to tell me sometimes about tender-heeled Achilles; I used to tell him about a tender-hearted boy. But we could not always understand one another, your father and I. Our educations were different; only I knew a bit more of the world than he did, for all his Latin primers."

And then Uncle Ben went on to say other things about a boat being all the better for ballast, and running as much as possible on an even keel, for she answered her helm truer so in rough weather; and about family mottoes, and knowing one's own mind, until Jim stopped him with—

“Uncle Ben, I believe you are the best fellow in this world—too good to make promises to——”

“Don't want 'em,” was interpolated.

“But it's easy enough for me to keep straight now; and, if you're better pleased with me in future, remember it's not my fault, but Lucy's.”

“She isn't *sharp*, is she, Jim? I hate sharp women,” said the little lawyer, screwing up his eyes.

His nephew explained. He explained with that deliberate earnestness which comes of conviction.

James Vraile was no fool, whatever he was; but there comes a time to every man, sooner or later—better for him if it comes sooner—and, generally speaking, only once in his whole lifetime, when a little naked deity with a pair of little wings and a quiver slung over his shoulder flutters down upon him and puts a pair of chubby hands over his eyes, so that he sees crooked—if he sees at all—for a period of time that is regulated by no known laws. Second-lieutenants and secretaries of state, ploughboys and plenipotentiaries, paupers and princes, are all subject to the affliction—affection, perhaps, is a better word—and, like the measles, the sooner they get over it the better for them, for it is apt to be more fatal in after-life.

“Well, well,” he said, when his nephew had quite finished, “I was never married—married myself, you

see, and I know very little about women except litigious ones. My opinions about matrimony are not worth much, but my opinion is that it will do you good. A good woman is the making of a man—a bad un his ruin. Flight was a bit of a scamp, I'm afraid; but that's no reason why his daughter should not be everything that's honest and straightforward. Pity she hasn't a little money; but, luckily, that won't matter much to you, my boy, so long as she knows her own mind."

Any one standing outside the door, and listening to these two talking without being able to see them, would have supposed that the "Jim" being spoken to was a little fellow in knickerbockers, and would have wondered how it could possibly be that the "boy" and matrimony had anything in common. But Jim, though his five-and-thirtieth birthday was an event of the past, and no one could tell what had been the original colour of his hair, was still a boy to Uncle Ben, and always would be, if he lived to be a hundred and his uncle a hundred and twenty-four. But they understood one another, and chatted on and on, until the old gentleman supposed that they had better get to business. At the sound of the word he underwent a sort of Jekyll-Hyde transformation—was no longer Uncle Ben but Lawyer Vraille. In ten minutes Jim knew more about his own affairs than he had known before in all his life—perhaps because, for the first time, he gave them his whole attention. Then they came to the settlements. Here they disagreed. Uncle Ben said his ideas were founded on common sense and fairness; Vraille said the terms were scurvy; Uncle Ben

that he would draw up no other. Vraille supposed that he could will his money—the rest of it—as he liked afterwards; Uncle Ben suggested that that was quite an after-consideration. The matter was settled at last—as Uncle Ben wished.

As Vraille was marrying Lucy for love—pure, honest, downright love—he wanted to show her the extent of his love by settling on her the one-half of his worldly possessions; but, as his uncle had not been able to see more than about an eighth of his argument, Jim walked to an office in the City and insured his life. That, and the absolute settlement of a small but sufficient annuity as pin-money, he thought would do; yes, that would do—with a will in case of accidents. It was late when he got back to his Club.

Now, there are some men whose affairs seem to be arranged for them in the proper order; others who are obliged to spend a great deal of unnecessary time in putting together the pieces of the puzzle of life, because they are handed to them out of turn. Vraille was one of these. No sooner had he settled on one course of action than some unlooked-for circumstance would often arise to upset his plans and unsettle his mind, when, if it had only happened at the right time, there would have been no difficulty.

He had pretty well decided that he would act on his uncle's advice and go back to Colonel Dare, should Lucy see no objection, when the telegraphic apparatus in the hall of his Club began to click out tape and intelligence. He arrived to find it in full click, but too late to get anywhere near it. A knot of men were

standing round it, hemming it in on every side. But presently a servant tore the tape into lengths and pinned them up on a notice-board; and then, over the heads and shoulders of those in front of him, he read with difficulty: "Complications . . . frontier . . . possibility . . . reinforcements . . . England . . . ordered out . . ." and whistled. Phew! this made all the difference. What would his uncle say now? Should he wire to Skrim? No; Ghoojeram might go to the devil, or the devil to Ghoojeram, at any rate until he had consulted with Lucy.

It was a warlike little tape, but, after the manner of tapes, was cautious; it was only a preparatory tape and did not commit itself. But it had its effect upon the Stock Exchange and the Skrim Agency and other large offices, and Jim received a telegram next day which (punctuated) read: "Ransidnugger, Jujabpore, both gone. Will you take Ghoojeram? Skrim."

It had been a hardish battle to make up his mind to go back to Colonel Dare as if nothing had happened—a great deal had happened that he resented with all the animus of his nature—but he had definitely won that battle. He had wished to spare Lucy the unpleasantness of going back to the scene of his arrest and trial, and to start his married life fair and square in a new place and with a new set. But he had come to the conclusion that his wishes were things to be avoided, and that his uncle's counsel was sound. He owed Uncle Ben much—more than he could ever repay—and he was only too anxious to please him, apart from other considerations. After all, it did not matter where he went, so long as Lucy was happy. She was to have

had the casting vote; the position was not materially altered, and the decision should remain with her still.

Mrs. Flight thought him uncommonly uninteresting the next time he dined there, and fell asleep sooner than usual. Then, when he and Lucy were practically alone, he told her all, omitting nothing but his own wishes. There might be war; there might not; no one knew, and no reliance could be placed in newspaper reports, which were at present all "ifs" and "buts," "unlesses" and "in cases."

Colonel Dare and Ghoojeram were the alternatives, for Uncle Ben had said that to exchange elsewhere would be an unmanly thing to do. Ghoojeram was many hundred miles from the possible scene of action; but still those in the country would naturally run a better chance of employment than those ten thousand miles away, and the recent news, had he known it at the time, might have reversed Uncle Ben's opinion.

"What do you mean by employment?" she asked.

He hesitated a moment, and then: "Well, seeing active service in some shape or form."

"And do you mean to say that you want to take me to India to leave me all alone out there while you are away fighting and perhaps getting killed?"

Put like that, it did seem a selfish thing to suggest, he said. But he was not suggesting it—merely trying to decide the best thing to be done. Of course she was ambitious; of course she wanted him to get on in his profession; and here was a chance, an off chance certainly, but still a chance that might never occur again. "When a woman like you," he declared, meaning every word he said, "tells a man—

she will follow him to the world's end, and that she is ready to undergo, for his sake, the little disagreeables that every soldier's wife must expect, she is in earnest. I know that. I know what you would do for me. But I hope never to see you suffer discomfort—there need never be occasion, luckily. If the worst were to come to the worst, my going away for a month or two would only mean a trip to the Hills, where I know a number of nice people who would be kind to you, and that at some time a long way hence most probably."

She wanted to interrupt him, but he would not let her speak until she had heard both sides of the question; but, after expatiating on his conversation with his uncle, he pulled Mr. Skrim's telegram from his pocket and handed it to her.

"Oh, but I really think your uncle is right," she said when she had read it; "he thinks it the manly thing to do to go back and meet Colonel Dare as if nothing had happened"—she used Uncle Ben's very words—"and I think so too. I don't mind meeting him, Jim, really I don't—not a bit. I don't mind that stupid court-martial; it doesn't matter in the least; besides, you should certainly keep good friends with your uncle."

And so it was decided. He thanked her for her loving interest, said she was a sound, sensible woman, called her a number of very pretty names, and tore himself away.

But somehow he did not wish to put in writing the evidence of his refusal to go to India, so he answered Mr. Skrim's telegram in person. The agent received

him coldly. "Oh, indeed," was all he said when Vraille told him he had decided not to exchange at all.

"I am sorry to have troubled you," said Vraille, who was always polite when he was not thinking of something else; "and no doubt some one will take Ghoojeram."

"I effected an exchange yesterday," said Mr. Skrim, taking a penknife from his pocket and proceeding to pare his nails; "you did not ask for the refusal of it, and left my telegram unanswered."

"Gone already?" exclaimed Jim, with something like a pang of regret in his heart.

"Snapped up," said Mr. Skrim tersely.

It did not matter. He had made up his mind beforehand; and, having made up his mind, tried to believe himself thoroughly happy. He met Lucy at the photographer's, and either the prospect of having her picture taken, or the news of the fall of Ghoojeram, or both, made her look more radiant than ever. He was enchanted.

Happy is the man with a mind made up! and, if only peace had been probable instead of war, Vraille would have been the happiest man loitering about London.

However, he devoted himself to his idol, tried to forget all rumours of war and disquieting telegrams, and so got through the time. The marriage settlements had been signed; the banns proclaimed for the second time; Vraille had secured the services of a bachelor friend, Lucy of three spinster ladies not *quite* so handsome as herself. The day itself had been finally fixed; everything had been arranged, except the details of

the honeymoon. Vraile was in favour of some quiet little spot in Devonshire, but gave way to Lucy's preference for Paris—there were beautiful things to be seen and bought in Paris, she said. Paris was decided on.

It only wanted a week to the day, and he was told to keep away from Cabstand Square as Lucy was very busy with her trousseau. He had very few preparations of his own to make—presents to buy and commissions to execute for Lucy, and a stock of books on military subjects (for he had made up his mind to read hard in the winter evenings) to lay in. Spinning these occupations out as much as possible, they only helped to occupy two days; and he was beginning to wonder if the intervening five would ever pass, when he received a letter from his major which made him jump as if he had been shot before he had read a dozen words.

“We are ordered to hold ourselves in readiness for foreign service,” the words ran, “and all leave is cancelled. You must, I am afraid, come back, unless you can arrange at the War Office for a fortnight or so. Under the circumstances they'll probably give you that much grace. Your orders follow”

This was cutting the Gordian knot with a vengeance! How would Uncle Ben take it? What would Lucy say? There was no need to frighten the girl, so he just sent her a message saying he would look in in the evening, and then hurried off to Bedford Row. He spent an hour or two with his uncle, and the effect of the interview was printed in rather large type upon his face when it was over. He looked sad and serious as he left the office, and, having secured a fortnight “on very urgent

private affairs," sat in an arm-chair in the club smoking-room, thinking "how the deuce" he was to break the news in the least disagreeable way to Lucy.

It was by no means an easy task. At first Lucy thought he was joking, and would not listen seriously; but, when she realised that he was in earnest, she flashed out with—

"It's too bad; it's too bad! You promised me faithfully you would not go. You have broken your promise. Why should I spend a week's honeymoon in a pokey little place I never heard of? I can't, and, what's more, I shan't. I've been made a fool of, and I won't stand it."

He seemed to be dazed at first, and for some time stood before her dumb, as if convicted of a crime, without a word to say in his defence. Indeed, he felt horribly guilty. She had every reason to be vexed; and this was the time of all others to be kind and considerate. He tried to be kind, and began to say some soft, soothing things. But she did not want his kindness; he had treated her shamefully, and she turned away, refusing to be comforted. Then he tried to reason with her, remembering that it was essential to be patient.

"But, my darling," he urged, "I have nothing to do with my going. I no more expected all this yesterday than you did yourself. I am ordered."

"Then you must get out of the order somehow, if you want me to marry you. I'm not to be treated in this way. It's a shame! a shame! I believe you knew all along."

"Indeed, indeed, Lucy, I did not."

"Well, exchange then; you were anxious enough to exchange until your uncle dissuaded you."

"I cannot now. I must go, even if—even if I go alone."

"And that you certainly will, as far as I'm concerned."

"You don't mean that seriously, Lucy?"

"I do, I do;" and she began to cry. It was mortifying in the extreme. The sheen of her wedding-dress was dulled; her beautiful trousseau was useless, and all her pretty new frocks; her bridesmaids would no longer envy her; the nice little wedding was robbed of all its fascination; the trip to Paris and the pleasant garrison life at home were no more. Oh, it was a shame! It was ridiculous and absurd of Jim to say that they could honeymoon all their lives. Those were not her ideas; and if she could not be married properly, she would not be married at all, which last sentiment she expressed aloud.

"Is that your last word, Lucy?" he asked, with no kindness in his voice now, nor yet impatience, but only sadness.

Yes, it was her last word, and he moved toward her, saying he would come and see her before he started.

"When I come home again——" but the thought was too much for him, and, flinging his arms round her, he exclaimed, "No, no, you don't mean it, sweetheart you can't mean it. I cannot—cannot help myself You are punishing me unjustly. Tell me at least that you are sorry for me."

She was not mollified, and wrenched herself free. She was too engrossed with her own great disappoint

ment and sense of injury, to be affected by either argument or entreaty—much less to be subdued by useless demonstrations of affection, which only tended to increase her anger.

It was an unequal battle. He was suffering heavily, and was on the point of being not only vanquished but utterly routed, when an ally arrived on the field in the nick of time and saved the catastrophe.

Mrs. Flight had often done her daughter good service in her day, and now, with the instinct of an old soldier and the quick intelligence of a military genius, she took in the whole situation at a glance, and saw pretty well what was wanted. A word or two put her in possession of the facts, and a question or two decided her how to act. Vraille was hopelessly worsted and useless; that was evident, so she ordered a retreat.

"The news has upset her, poor girl," she said to him, "and she has not been herself all day. Better leave her to me, Jim, now, and by to-morrow she will have quite got over the shock. She is inclined to be a little hysterical," she whispered, leading him toward the door; "but it's only the over-excitement of the wedding—all girls are the same;" and she pushed him gently from the room.

But he felt that it was not a case of "to-morrow;" he had received his *congé*. It was all up. Like everything else in life that he had set his heart on, he had failed within an inch of success, or succeeded only to find out that he had better have failed. There was nothing to be done but to pack up and leave London the next day. What should he say to people—and to Uncle Ben?

But Mrs. Flight, meanwhile, was fighting his battles for him, and she meant to win. She no sooner heard the front door banged behind him than she turned to the attack.

"You stupid, stupid, selfish girl," she said; "what have you been saying to make him look like that? How much have you got to retract to-morrow?"

Lucy was sitting before her on the sofa, not crying, but sulkily picking the hem of her handkerchief.

"I said I would not marry him, and I won't," she replied, but in a tone not nearly so decided as that she had used to Vraille.

"Do you know what he has settled on you?" asked her mother. "Do you remember the things he has given you? Are you aware that the trousseau you think so much about is to be paid for by him? Have you no conscience, no pride, no self-respect? In return for all he has done for you, you abuse him for things he cannot help; he is too good for you—much too good. Lucy, he is a fine fellow. I will do nothing to persuade him to marry you—nothing; but write and tell him that you are heartily ashamed of yourself, you shall, and this very evening, too. If he likes to forgive you, well and good; but don't expect any assistance from me. I mean to act perfectly honestly by him, for I like him."

Mrs. Flight knew her daughter, and rightly calculated on the influence of her own strength of will.

Having broken down the enemy's defence with the sudden rush, she pursued her advantage, and soon put all opposition at an end. She declared that Lucy's repugnance to India was childish and absurd. Indi

was a matter of course for all soldiers, and sooner or later India was bound to come; it had come sooner, that was all. She would not allow that her daughter had any excuse for her treatment of Jim, for which she must, and should, apologise, whatever else happened.

Mrs. Flight had right on her side, and a good cause is a powerful weapon; in the end she won a signal victory, and Lucy sat down to write her letter.

Vraille could only read the written words of that letter when it reached him; he could not read the thoughts behind them. He could only see the terms of endearment and protestations of contrition, which were all the sweeter for being somewhat ungrammatically expressed. He kissed the letter and followed in person one of his own that he had written and sent the night before.

Now had peace and beatitude not been thus restored; had Vraille been hard-hearted enough to refuse forgiveness for the unkind things that had been said; had Lucy adhered to her original determination, as most women—especially beautiful ones—usually do, then James Vraille would have gone out to India, moped for a while, married some one else, and his story would have been entirely altered from that moment. But peace and beatitude did reign; Vraille was not a bit more resentful than other men madly in love with a beautiful woman; and Lucy was weaker, let us say, than the generality of her sex.

And so there was a gay wedding—a “pretty” one, the three bridesmaids called it—after all. Mrs. Flight passed the last of her series of sons-in-law; Uncle Ben,

resplendent in a favour as large as his voice, presented his new niece, as he called her, with a necklace that made her eyes glisten, and his "boy" with a cheque that made his open with surprise.

All was as it should be, and Lucy Flight left her name behind her in the church in Cabstand Square for ever, and drove away with happy Jim—Mrs. Vraille.

CHAPTER IV.

YOUNG FOLKS AT HOME.

It was April—no showery, sunshiny, first-one-thing-and-then-another sort of April, such as Lucy had always looked upon as the proper prelude to Easter and a new gown, but a blazing, scorching, piping April about which there was no uncertainty: it meant the hot weather, and meant it in earnest.

The thermometer was rising higher and higher every day. The heat was intense. But Jim said that it was nothing to what they might expect later on. Nothing? Why it was insufferable; she could scarcely breathe. The punkah was not working half enough; that wretched coolie always left off pulling directly she fell asleep. Perhaps he thought she was asleep still; she would soon let him know that she was wide awake—and Mrs. Vraile summoned her ayah, who deferentially received an angry message and softly departed to deliver it. For five or ten minutes the punkah flapped hoarsely, and then subsided into its former noiseless and kneeful swing. It was Lucy's first experience of hot weather in the plains, and she was unaccustomed to the noise of punkahs.

Her was horribly hot; but, after all, India was not that such a disagreeable place as she had imagined it would be when she left England. Jim had been lucky

enough to be sent to a large central station where there was plenty going on—a delightful place, with a kursaal, a gymkhana, tennis, cricket and polo grounds, bands, gardens, a club, a theatre, a beautiful ball-room, a Government House, and some of the most charming men in the shape of A.D.C.s that she had ever met. More than all, she herself was very popular, and had formed quite a little circle of her own that encompassed her about whenever she showed her face in public. She had made a sensation directly she arrived; the women had one and all admired her clothes, by inference if not openly, and had hardly yet left off asking her questions about the latest London fashions. As for the men, she held a little court almost every day; they flocked round her carriage in the Mall, and vied with one another in their attentions; they would leave any one to come to her, do anything to please her, give anything to dance with her: she reigned supreme. A garrison at home was no doubt delightful, but the delights of a garrison at home were paltry compared to those of an important Indian cantonment. She had always been admired, even in London, where there were so many beautiful faces and figures to contend against; but here she was a queen, an undisputed queen. Every one was so kind and easy; there was no stupid stiffness about Indian society, and the easy mode of life different to what she had expected it would be, had been a source of pleasurable excitement. The novelty of these things was beginning to wear off certainly, still she had spent a thoroughly enjoyable time.

Of course she had! India is kind to young women, and by its special attentions to them do

utmost to make amends for the disadvantages of matrimony in such a climate. White women are at a premium, and are valued; but matrimony is a serious matter with a steadily declining rate of exchange. With the rupee at one-and-sixpence, and a thousand eyes watching one's every movement, it is hardly safe to dance too often with a girl until she is some one else's girl. Then it does not matter. The girl's business in India is to marry. That done, she is free to enjoy life to the utmost, and every man's duty to help her to enjoy it. India is the country *par excellence* for young married women. It was conquered for their benefit! Its spinsters are graciously allowed to skim over the surface of its pleasures, but only its young matrons are entitled to plunge into the vortex of its delights. Mrs. Vraillé's mind was not of that order given to reasoning, but rather to taking conclusions for granted. Being not only pretty but lovely, she enjoyed the fascinations of social India, and, without questioning the why or the wherefore, was only greatly gratified that it was so.

She was the most lovely woman in Asia!! Mr. Rook, that promising young civilian, had told her so; and Mr. Rook knew what he was talking about. He had come out on board the same ship with them, and how devoted he had been! It was absurd of Jim, who knew nothing about him, to pretend he did not like him. Mr. Rook was a pleasant and decidedly useful neighbour. There could be no possible objection to his riding with him occasionally. Jim was uxorious—that was the word Mr. Rook had used—uxorious. He had intended to look that word out in the
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dictionary to see what it meant, but had forgotten or been too busy.

She was her own mistress, too, with carriages and horses of her own, money of her own, settled on herself for her own exclusive use, so that she could order out from England as many things as she pleased without consulting any one, which was convenient. Oh yes, altogether she had spent a delightful winter—cold weather they called it.

But now the cold weather was gone; Jim said that in another week or two the *tattis* would be in the doors and windows and the thermantidotes at work. There was no absolute necessity for her to wait till Jim's leave. Why should she not go to the Hills at once? Jim could easily follow on afterwards. She would put the idea to him; he would do anything she asked him. Over and above that, he was dull company, with his languages that were impossible to understand, his books that no one but himself and his moonshee cared to read, and his drills that she had long since tired of watching. Ah, how soon a married couple settled down to familiarity and commonplace prosiness! He used to talk a great deal about a perpetual honeymoon, but of course that was all nonsense, and theirs had been an absurd honeymoon. They were now just like any other husband and wife; and husbands, she knew—all her friends told her so, apart from her own experience—were creatures to be managed; well managed, they were most useful. Every one said she managed Jim well, and yet she was not conscious of having given herself any particular trouble in the matter, but supposed she had a peculiar aptitude

for managing all men—it seemed like it, at any rate. Women she had never very much cared about.

She longed to see the Hills again, now that she was well and strong and able to go about. The hot weather before she had not had a chance, cooped up as she had been in the house all day, going nowhere and seeing no one. And then the child had been such a tie that the summer had slipped away without her having done anything worth mentioning or even remembering.

Lucy Vraille, “the most beautiful woman in Asia,” as she lay stretched under her punkah, lazily watching its monotonous sway, and giving herself up luxuriously to these reflections, richly deserved the greater part of the extravagant epithet bestowed on her by Mr. Rook. Marriage had enhanced her loveliness, and as yet no extremes of temperature had tampered with her complexion; if anything, the healthy outdoor life she had been leading had improved it. An artist with any sense of colouring and appreciation of the poetry of form would have been glad of such a model at any time; but to have caught her then, in all the luxury of indolent repose and unstudied *abandon*, would have driven him well-nigh mad with professional delight. She was indeed a fair subject for a picture—a theme for a poem—a heroine fit to adorn a fairy tale—a study wherewith to point a moral.

It was a pity that such a woman, who ought at least to have been a Viceroy’s consort, should be thrown away upon such an uninteresting and mediocre fellow as Jim Vraille. So every one said; and so, probably Lucy was thinking as she looked at him standing in

the doorway. What a contrast! What a disenchantment his appearance cast upon the whole scene. A few hours before he had been spic and span enough, dressed in his spotless white clothing. But now it was begrimed with dust and dirt, crumpled and creased; his face was smeared with streaks of dust, his sword was rusted by the sweat of his horse's flank, his boots had lost all polish, and his helmet its unsullied pipeclay surface. He was very hot, very dirty, very unsightly, and, amid such dainty surroundings, a monstrous incongruity—a blot that robbed the picture of all its charm.

He looked at his wife with intense admiration for a moment, and then touched her cheek with his lips; just touched it, no more, for Lucy pushed his face away. But she could not push his heart away; he was foolishly in love with her, and he said so; that had made him forget himself.

"There, don't come near me till you're clean," she said—at once a natural and sensible remark. Lucy was always natural and sensible where self was concerned.

He had been up since daybreak, and had been kept in the lines longer than usual; he was famished, he said, and would be ready for breakfast in ten minutes. But, before leaving the room, he walked over to a little cot standing at the foot of his wife's bed, and looked at a little face lying on a pillow no whiter than itself. A little wailing voice had made itself heard through many hours of the past night, and the child, worn out with heat and weariness, was sleeping late. Its little limbs were spread out wide; it was not sleeping, as children in England sleep, "cuddled up," but with tiny legs

and arms outstretched in a manner that spoke pathetically of the heat.

"Poor little beggar," he muttered, bending over the cot; "we must get him to the Hills." Then stooping lower still, and with a look of sudden concern, he began to examine the child's face attentively. He dropped upon his knees, and inserting his finger between the little pouting lips, forced them apart, and took something from the child's mouth. It was but a speck of brownish substance, but after looking at it closely in the light, and smelling it, he called the ayah into the room with a voice full of angry indignation. He showed his finger to the woman and spoke rapidly in Hindustani to her. She protested with many vehement gesticulations, to which he paid no attention, but, pointing to the door, repeated twice a word which Lucy knew meant, "Go."

"No wonder he sleeps soundly," he said angrily to his wife, "he's been drugged with opium. They will do it, if they're not watched."

"Well, how was I to know?" Lucy asked.

"No, no; of course not. I've sent that woman about her business, and I'll see about getting an English nurse; but, Lucy, the poor little chap will want all your attention. It's a bad country for children at best."

He was always interfering about the baby, but she thought it wise to say nothing, and only showed her resentment by pouting; for Jim had discovered the cause of those heavy sleeps which always succeeded the child's outcries when they were prolonged beyond a certain time, and for which she had never before been

fully able to account. His idea of procuring a really responsible white nurse was an excellent one, and in applauding it she expressed surprise that it had never occurred to them before.

Vraille, in the plodding, persevering way that was daily becoming more customary to him, set to work to institute inquiries, and, after much advertising and research, at last discovered a woman in the place itself whom he thought might suit. She was the widow of a corporal who had recently drunk himself to death; she was far from handsome, but was without encumbrance, and bore a character for sobriety and honesty. Jim sought her out and questioned her as to her intentions and inclinations. Her intentions, she said, were regulated by official arrangements, and she supposed she would be drafted home with the next batch of time-expired; her inclinations were to do as she was bid. She had no particular hankering after her native land, as her relations were all dead and she had lost touch with her friends; but she had no desire to stay in the country where, as she said, "she had no one now to do for." This frame of mind seemed propitious to Jim's scheme, and he asked her to call upon his wife that evening. The hard-featured widow of Corporal Foresight said she would do so, but would bind herself to nothing.

It was not exactly the place of a captain serving on full pay in a royal regiment to be touting for nurses; and people tittered when they heard of it; but he had ceased to study appearances, and the only thing that troubled him was the thought, every now and again, that, though Lucy could not be expected to understand

Indian ways and customs, still she might take interest all the same in his efforts to benefit their child. It surprised him that she did not seem to care about it more.

He told his wife of the appointment he had made for her, and Lucy said she would be sure to be back from the gardens in time to keep it, but that he had chosen rather an inconvenient day. He did not himself care much about the gardens, and after a day of Sanscrit roots preferred a game of racquets as a means of clearing away the cobwebs weaved in his brain by the patient moonshee.

He returned home before Lucy, and found Mrs. Foresight seated in the verandah with the baby on her knee. The baby was the key to the situation which the good woman contemplated taking, and she appeared to be reconnoitring before deciding on her course of action. Judging from the way in which they seemed to understand one another, she had evidently been studying his traits, talking to him in his own language, and otherwise endeavouring to become acquainted with his general character.

"I'll take on," she said, rising to her feet with the baby in her arms when she saw Vraile. "I'll take on, if I suit the lady, who's not at home after I've walked three blazin' 'ot miles to see her; and you may strike me off the establishment as soon as she comes in an' approves o' my transfer."

This woman was rather an oddity. Her face was as hard and sharp as the corner of a street, and her figure about as graceful as a lamp-post's; but there was a pleasant softness about her eye as it fell on the baby that won Jim's heart, and, in spite of the ramrod-like

rigidity of her person and the directness of her manner, he determined to give her his support with his wife. Lucy, when she discovered that Mrs. Foresight was a good needlewoman, raised no objection, and the corporal's widow was forthwith attached to Vraille's household as nurse, lady's maid, needle-woman, and general factotum, under the name Judith. She preferred, she said, to wave her own flag than to sail under colour, that had never done her very much credit.

In less than a week Judith had relieved her mistress of all care connected with the baby. She gathered him to her arms and took him away. She kept him out of earshot when he was cross, and only brought him into his mother's society when he was good; at night he now slept under Judith's punkah, and Lucy's rest was no longer disturbed by his pitiful little wailings and constant demands for attention. This was a great relief. A marked difference began to show itself, too, in the child's general conduct. It ate more and cried less, it slept at regular times, and slept well; it even crowed and cooed sometimes; it was quite a pattern baby, and Judith a pattern nurse. She was also invaluable in other ways—dress-making and mending, acting as matron and housekeeper, taking charge of keys and cupboards, looking after the native servants, and, as Lucy put it, making herself generally useful. In deed, she saved her so much trouble that Mrs. Vraill began to wonder how she had ever been able to manage without her.

The most valuable characteristic of this woman was her endurance of heat; she seemed to mind the heat no more than the punkah-coolie did, whereas poor Lucy

was quite incapacitated from taking an active interest in anything but the bachelors' ball that was to be given before the place became an utter abomination of desolation from the now rapidly increasing exodus of celebrities. After that event she thought that she too, like the other best people of the cantonment, would like to get out of the raging, maddening heat.

When Jim came in one morning from the lines, dirty as usual, and told her that he should not be able to get away so soon as he had expected, as his major had decided to take first leave, she thought it high time to make definite arrangements for her own departure immediately after the ball, and determined to lay her plans before him that very day.

When he was clean and cool and white again, he joined her at breakfast. The meal left nothing to be desired, and had been prepared by a cook whose wages were not inconsiderable. They were waited on by a stately Khansamah, whose glossy blue-black beard never showed more than one day's growth of white, and dignified Mahometans in scrupulously clean linen, with the Vraile crest and motto on a badge in their turbans. The Khansamah was Lucy's stand-by, and he could speak English quite well enough for her purposes. Everything about her was well ordered and good of its kind. She lived in good style—as good as any of her neighbours, she was proud to think.

Their bungalow was one of the best, and, what was more to the purpose, one of the coolest in the station. They had quite a stud of horses in their stables, and carriages of all sorts in their coach-house. Jim had been as good as his word, and Lucy had little to

complain of; he had given her all he promised, and was daily gratifying fresh wants.

Beside his plate lay the morning pile of letters. From the number he selected his own, which were few, and handed the remainder to Lucy. She had many correspondents; but he, as a rule, scarcely any. It was mail day, however, and had brought the usual weekly letter from Uncle Ben.

It was not very sociable of them, but, instead of talking, they read their letters. Lucy, after shuffling through hers quickly, glanced across the table at her husband, and slipped one of them into her pocket unopened; it was a little matter that would keep, and she wished to read it afterwards. It had been easy to smuggle it away without his seeing, for he was absorbed in his own correspondence. His forehead was puckered and his brows contracted; his face seemed to have grown visibly older in the last five minutes; the wrinkles were all showing in rigid, clear-cut lines. He was getting to be quite an ugly man, Lucy thought, as she looked at him; but, at any rate, he was a delightfully simple one.

He looked up and smiled faintly, then asked her her news. She had none, except that a box, which she was anxiously expecting, had been delayed.

"What box?" he asked.

"Why, a box of dresses—I told you a long time ago—but you are always mooning or moonsheeing" (she seldom joked, but this was such a palpable pun) "instead of listening, or you would have remembered. You take less interest in my appearance, Jim, than any other person in the place."

Lucy

"Some of these servants," Jim said in very bad French, "understand English."

"Well, what if they do?" she replied in her own tongue. "It's true, and they want no telling. We have not a taste in common."

She was annoyed about her dress ; but, apart from that, how true was her remark, how utterly and deplorably true ! She, even she, who was not preternaturally quick, had divined the truth long ago. They had not a taste in common. His conversation was about "Higher Standards" and "Sanskrit specials" and other subjects of a similarly abstruse nature which she could not be expected to understand ; nor did she try. His ways were not her ways. If he made love to her, he did so gravely, instead of gaily, as love should be made ; he was always talking of ideals and objects and aims in life—looking ahead at ends, as he called them, instead of enjoying the present like any other sensible being. In place of amusing himself and making himself agreeable to the people who came to the house, he would often leave the room while they were there, and not return until they had gone. He had been positively rude to Mr. Rook on more than one occasion ; and, when he did go to a ball, he wanted to dance with his own wife, which was absurd. Then, again, at other times, he was always wanting her to accompany him alone, and hanging about her apron-strings when he was not wanted at all. A married woman was a married woman, and Lucy had become a married woman on purpose to enjoy the independence of the position. It was not fair. She was disappointed in Jim ; he had not turned out as she expected.

He said nothing in answer to her remark, but smiled a feeble smile.

She would wake him up a bit, and force him to take interest in her by broaching the subject of her immediate departure to the Hills. "I've got a plan," she said.

"A plan?" he echoed.

"Yes, a plan; that's what I said. I'm off to the Hills directly after the bachelors' ball."

She had roused him at last. "I fear that's impossible, Lucy," he replied.

"Why impossible?"

"I can't get leave."

"But I can."

"It would do the little chap all the good in the world," he muttered.

"And it would do me all the good in the world, too. Anyway, I'm off."

"Lucy, Lucy, think!" he exclaimed, and then in a lower tone continued, "think of the journey and expense."

"Expense?"

"Yes. If you and the child go now, it will mean keeping up a double establishment. I've got this house any way until July. I have been disappointed about my leave. The hot weather is not unhealthy, and I had intended taking two months, or three, if possible, from the end of June; but now my plans may be all upset. We must think about it; you must give me time to think about it."

His peculiar dreamy tone irritated her. She disliked contradiction, too, and spoke up like a brave woman—

“You’ve got from now until the ball, nearly three weeks, to think about it. Will that do?” .

“Three weeks; oh, yes, plenty of time—plenty of time. You see, Lucy, your expenses last year were very heavy.”

He was not even listening to her; he was thinking of something else as usual. “What has that to do with what we were talking about? You are a rich man, are you not?”

“I was,” he said; and then, pushing away his plate, he rose and left the room. He was pre-occupied, and when he was pre-occupied he was rude.

CHAPTER V.

HOT WEATHER.

HE was in trouble—in evident trouble; and he wished to be alone with his trouble, a very unsatisfactory state of things for a married man, a young one especially. Why did he not seek consolation from the partner of his joys and sorrows? There had been a time, once, when, instead of brooding over a trouble alone, he would have rushed with it at once to Lucy; and there had been a time, too, when he would have poured out his heart impetuously to his wife without waiting to weigh his words or consider the consequences. That time had passed; it had glided imperceptibly away. He was not conscious of when or how the change had been effected, or even that there was a change at all. It never occurred to him that he himself had changed, still less that Lucy had; but little by little he had begun to be more cautious in approaching her with his hopes and fears, more and more fearful of vexing her, or, as he would have called it, of paining her. It was merely the natural drifting apart of two wholly dissimilar minds, a social phenomenon that no bond however apparently indissoluble can counteract. He had begun to believe, if he thought about it at all, that there are many topics, too many, that a man cannot discuss with a woman, even if that woman is his

wife; many feminine interests a man, even a husband, cannot understand. He had often tried to understand his wife and had failed, and so he supposed that she too had tried to understand him with as little success. She was no more to blame than he. They loved one another, he presumed, as much as ever, and that sufficed. Ah! yes; that sufficed. He was getting older; his impetuosity was cooling; his keen sense of pleasure was becoming dull; the edge was gone, somehow. And how impetuous he had been! taking every question to her straight and expecting her to understand; seeking her sympathy because he was proud of commanding it; loving her simplicity, and thinking only of her fondness for him—but that time had passed. It seemed to have been so long, long ago that he caught himself doubting sometimes whether it had really ever been at all, and whether it had existed only in his imagination. But surely no! Surely the thought was unworthy; there must have been truth as there was reality in those happy evenings spent in Cabstand Square. And yet those times were somehow gone.

What should he say to her now? how break the news? How would she take Uncle Ben's letter? A man could never tell how a woman would take anything—much less a woman like Lucy. Two years' acquaintance had helped him little in guessing at the course she was ever likely to pursue. But perhaps she would show her true colours in adversity and "come out strong"—most likely, women often did; and he had never yet seen Lucy under adverse circumstances.

As nothing was to be gained by delay, he determined.

to strike while the iron was hot, and, finding Lucy in the drawing-room writing letters, went up to her, and, putting his hand on her shoulder, said softly—"Lucy, dear, come and talk to me a little; I've something important to tell you."

"I'm very busy," she said, hastily covering her letter with the blotting-pad; "can't you wait?"

"Yes, I can wait," he said slowly, and, taking his hand off her shoulder, picked up an envelope addressed, "The Hon. Herbert Rook."

"I should not have more correspondence with this man than I could help, if I were you," he continued.

"Why not?" she asked.

"Well, he's a loose sort of fish, I think—not quite straight."

"Do you know anything against him?"

"Oh, no, only that is what I think."

"My dear Jim, I don't really believe you know anything about it; he's received everywhere, and, if you would only try to make yourself a little pleasant to him, you'd get to like him just as much as every one else does."

"Well, well, I dare say you are right. What are you writing to him about?"

"Oh, nothing; only a picnic he is getting up." It was a very small picnic, consisting only of himself and his great friend, young Hale of the cavalry, as joint hosts, Mrs. Palmira, young Hale's special admiration, and Lucy (if she would come); so small that it was not worth her while to enter into particulars.

Jim put the envelope down and walked away. When she had finished writing her acceptance, she joined him

under the punkah, and, dropping wearily into a lounge-chair, said, "Well, what is it?"

"I've had very bad news, Lucy—very bad indeed."

"You're not going to be ordered away from here, are you?"

"No, no; it's about money."

She turned a shade paler, and made no reply.

"My money," he continued; "I'm afraid, from what my uncle says, that I've lost a great deal."

Lucy regained her composure, and the colour crept back into her cheeks again.

"I cannot tell you how grieved I am that this blow should have come so soon after our marriage. Until to-day I had not so much as a suspicion, indeed I had not. You know that, don't you, dear? I would have cut off my hand sooner than deceive you about a single penny. However, thank Heaven, your money is all right."

"How much have you lost?"

"Lucy, if this news I hear to-day be true—and I fear it is—I've lost the equivalent of half my income."

He drew his hand over his forehead, and Lucy said, "Oh, what a nuisance!"

Then, holding Uncle Ben's letter open before him and glancing at it occasionally, he attempted a rough explanation. She listened and tried to understand. But when, after a time, details had been entered into more minutely, and it appeared that servants would have to be discharged, horses and carriages sold, a less expensive house rented, and various other unpleasant means taken towards retrenchment, she fairly lost all patience.

"I don't understand your shares and stocks," she

said, "I don't know what you mean by securities and bank dividends; but I know that I never did like that Uncle Ben, as you call him, and always thought you were a great deal too much under his thumb."

Jim looked surprised. Then he attempted an explanation in vindication of his uncle's character, but it was up-hill work. In vain he pointed out that his father, and not his uncle, had invested the lost money, and that a bank failure was an eventuality impossible to foresee. Uncle Ben had himself lost heavily through the same cause, he said; but that was no argument.

"How do you know he has?" was all she asked.

For answer he handed her his uncle's letter; but she declined to read it, saying, "Oh, of course it's very easy for him to *say* so," whereat Jim declared that her insinuations were ill-natured and absurd, and she told him not to lose his temper.

It was not that she would not, but that she could not understand. She could neither divest her mind of the belief that Uncle Ben was at the bottom of all the mischief, nor comprehend the significance of their loss. So many thousand pounds! The figures were figures and nothing more—an expression merely—a computation in round numbers of which she could not realise the detailed importance when placed before her in bulk. Had the money been taken out of her purse in dribblets, had its value been reduced to yards of trimming which she could see, or its loss computed in hours of boredom which she could feel, then she might have understood her husband's worried expression. But, as it was, she dismissed the subject as dull, and began to discuss the Hills again as soon she got a chance.

He listened apathetically, neither acquiescing in her arrangements nor raising objections to them; but he did not again allude to his uncle's letter or to the news it contained.

"You are not attending to me," she said at last; "you don't even seem to care whether I go or not."

He was terribly sorry for her; she would feel the consequences of his loss far more than he; and more than all he regretted the apparent violation of all the promises he had made her before their marriage. It had been his custom all through life, when in doubt or trouble, to seek counsel of his uncle. Now he felt the want of the old gentleman's advice and sympathy more acutely than he had ever deemed possible before his marriage.

A man, even a strong-willed man, which Vraille was not, likes to talk a trouble over; the mere fact of discussing it takes the edge off it somewhat; discussion being as good for the mind as confession for the soul. But he was not a man to wear his grievance on his sleeve or cry it in the market-place, and, so, with as much show of resignation as he could muster, set himself to work to meet the coming alteration in his circumstances. But he did feel the want of Uncle Ben's advice and sympathy in his strait; he was alone with his worries and his account-books.

There was much to arrange—many details to be gone into; and in all matters of domestic economy he was forced to consult Judith. Lucy, when he questioned her, invariably referred him to Judith. "Oh, Judith manages that, you know," she would say, or "Judith has the keys," or "I handed all my books over to Judith." To Judith, therefore, he applied, and

never applied in vain : she knew all about everything, and it appeared to him was able to render an exceedingly good account of her stewardship. What would his wife do without Judith ? he thought. Still, it was only fair to let her know that their mode of life would have to be conducted for the future on a sensibly reduced scale. This he asked Lucy to do, but, as she forgot, did it himself.

"Do you mean," Judith asked him, "that you're about rejuicin' me wages?"

"No ; certainly not," said Jim, flushing up, and wishing with all his heart that he had not meddled in matters so purely domestic.

"Because, if that's your bother," she continued, "I'm willing to stay on without any till times improve. I've got sorter fond of the child, and don't want to leave him yet a while."

She said this in a semi-defiant way, clutching the baby to her and tossing her head so violently that she nearly tossed off the huge sun-hat she was wearing. All her movements were jerky and mechanical ; she was a wooden woman, like a Noah's wife out of a toy ark. Her brown holland dress was straight and stiff without any attempt at embellishment or decoration in its composition. She was a hard-faced, hard-bosomed, hard-headed soldier's widow who had not seen better times, and yet Jim Vraille, the whilom London dandy, found a sympathy in her vulgarity that he had never yet discovered in all his lovely Lucy's elegant refinement.

"Whatever happens, we must try not to part with Judith," he said to his wife that evening.

"Part with her ! of course not ; she's a most useful woman."

"She is a thoroughly *good* woman, Lucy, and we ought to be very kind to her. She has not a friend in the world, and never complains ; she has not a pleasure in life, unless it's that boy, and never thinks of pleasure, but does her duty honestly and to the very best of her ability. Ah ! it often occurs to me what lessons fine ladies—and fine gentlemen, too—might learn of humble people whom they think not worth their notice."

"But Judith is by no means a humble person, let me tell you ; not nearly so humble as a servant should be, I think. She often lays down the law to me about baby, and once she had the impertinence to tell me that if I did not have him with me oftener, he would forget me. As if a child would ever forget its own mother !"

Jim sighed.

"The most beautiful thing in all nature," he said, "is a mother's love for her child. Marriages, they say, are made in heaven ; but very few are, Lucy, I am beginning to fear, judging from what I see in this place of husbands and wives. No ; a mother's love for her child is the only really heaven-born emotion ; *that* is perfect, unselfish, sacred. Judith told me once that she had an only boy like little Jim, and that he died just as he was beginning to know her and call her by the name that women most like to hear. She cried, poor woman, when she told me. It would pain you terribly to see our little chap growing up loving his nurse more than his mother. That is what Judith meant, and perhaps if he were with us more it would be a good thing. You see, she is naturally very fond of

children, and"—he continued smiling—"she is a dangerous rival for the little chap's affections."

"So am I fond of children," Lucy exclaimed; "but I like them with me at the right times and in the right places—not in the drawing-room, for instance, or when visitors are here. But, *à propos*, have you settled yet when we are to go to Simla? The heat is really more than I can bear."

This question had been put to him twenty times a day for the past six weeks in the same form and with the same persistence. He had answered it with the same evasion every time; he did not yet know whether he could manage it; he was doing his utmost—in any case, Simla was out of the question as too expensive.

"I shall be able to tell you definitely next month," he replied. "I can't get leave myself, as the major has gone away sick; still, a change would do both you and the child good. But, as I have told you before, I do not wish you to go so far away as Simla."

"And why not?"

"I have given you my reasons many times, Lucy."

"What nonsense!"

"Nonsense or not, I am afraid I mean what I say."

"And I mean to go."

"Look here, Lucy," he said very quietly, "I have already told you my *wishes*; as they are disregarded, I must tell you, once and for all, that I *do not intend* you to go to Simla. I have never, since we have been married, refused you anything you asked me or thwarted you in a single wish; but, as I now consider my reasons good, I thoroughly intend this once to exert my authority"—the word had a peculiarly un-

pleasant ring about it—"and I shall let you go when and where I think best."

She was amazed. This was the man whom she had led every one to believe she could twist round her little finger. She *would* have her own way—she must.

"I shall talk it over with Mrs. Palmira," she said, "and tell her what you say."

"No, you won't, Lucy, if you are wise; a woman who takes her home grievances abroad to air gets laughed at for her pains. Besides, what could twenty Mrs. Palmiras do? But, apart from all that, surely your pride, your affection for me, your sense of honour would prevent you from discussing with others things that only concern you and me."

"Me, you mean," she interrupted indignantly.

"What concerns you, concerns me; it is the same thing. Wait a little, dearest, have a little more patience, and you will see that I am right. Just wait until I have made the necessary arrangements, and then we can see how the land lies. Look here, dear, I can explain to you in five minutes, and you ought to know."

But she would not listen, she was hurt and indignant, and did not believe any arrangements were necessary.

Nor did she believe that any changes would in reality be made in their mode of life, and was quite surprised when, at the end of the month, a number of servants were discharged. It was not until her two carriage-horses had been sold, and her landau put up to auction, that she seemed to understand that her husband was not so rich as when she had married him. Then she began to complain, and to resent the curtail-

ment of her amusements. She was being made a fool of, she pathetically exclaimed, before the whole place. It could not be helped, Jim said; she had her Arab, he his charger, and with the dog-cart and pony they would have to manage until he was promoted and things looked up again.

But things did not look up at once. Jim left off playing polo, and Lucy was obliged to use Mr. Rook's saddle-horses much more frequently than formerly. Her weekly allowances for household expenditure were cut down—not that that signified much in itself, for the grave Khansamah still remained, and she could still order, Judith managing the rest; but, having outrun her private account, and with nothing to fall back upon, she was obliged to arrange matters with an accommodating Schroff in the bazaar, to whom Mrs. Palmira had introduced her, saying he was good for five thousand at any time, and very discreet.

The incessant gaiety of the cold weather had departed and given place to the humdrum routine of mid-summer amusement. A gallop sometimes before breakfast, a long, weary day, a drive to the gardens in the evening, an occasional dinner-party, now and then a small dance; that was all. Government House was no more; its inmates had fled, all the best people had left, and those that remained were for the most part too listless to entertain. Oh! it was horribly hot—hotter than poor Lucy had ever imagined even India could be; the nights were as hot as the days; the winds—that was the curious thing—instead of cooling the air, blew across the scorched country like blasts from a furnace, and necessitated the shutting up of every

crevice in the doors and windows throughout the house during the day. Worse than all, her skin was losing the bloom for which it had been famous ; the terrible heat was literally spoiling her complexion. It was a shame !

To her friends she accounted for the altered condition of her household by explaining that henceforth she would take up her permanent residence in the Hills, and, so far as the plains were concerned, would only be a bird of passage. She was only waiting, she said, to make a few final arrangements to be off. No one believed her, for in India, where it may be almost said that one's inner consciousness and the whole outside world are only divided by a "chic," every one knows everything about every one else as a matter of course, and Jim's story, once she had confided it to her friends Mr. Rook and Mrs. Palmira, was patent to the whole station.

"I want to go to Simla, that's the truth," she said to Mrs. Palmira, who was her confidante and general adviser.

"Easily do that, my dear," said that handsome leader of local fashion.

"Jim won't let me ; but don't tell any one that, it would sound so ridiculous," said Lucy. "What shall I do ? I want to go, and I can't afford it by myself."

"Try crying," suggested Mrs. Palmira.

"I've tried everything, and he only says, 'You must wait.'"

"Try Ramchundar Bux, and come with me to Tainee ; it's a capital little place."

"Ramchundar Bux was rather rude when I asked him for five hundred the other day, and threatened to tell Jim."

"Did he give you the money?—that's the great thing."

"Yes, he gave it to me in the end ; you see I intended to pay him something this month, but found I couldn't."

"Well, give up the Simla idea, and get 'a go' of fever."

"Get a go of fever?"

"Yes, to be sure ; headache, lassitude, cold chills, loss of appetite. No Jim in the world—especially *your* Jim—could withstand that ; and then come along with me to Tainee, brat and all ; we'll have a capital time. Young Hale, my own peculiar, is coming, and I dare say Berty Rook will look us up."

While Lucy was turning Mrs. Palmira's suggestions over in her mind, Jim suddenly told her that he had taken rooms for her at an hotel at Tainee, and that she, Judith, and the boy should start the following week.

"Oh, that's the very thing I was going to suggest to you, Jim dear ; Mrs. Palmira is going too. Oh, whatever made you think of Tainee, I wonder ; oh, how delightful!"

"I'm glad you're pleased, sweetheart," he said, smiling. "I wanted it to be a surprise. Go, my darling ; go and enjoy yourself. If I can't get leave in August, you can stay till then ; if I can, I'll join you there for a month."

So, in due course, Lucy joined Mrs. Palmira at Tainee, and set to work enjoying herself as much as she could within the small limits of its small society—it was a very unpretentious place, but cool—while Jim remained behind to superintend the movement of his household goods into his new and smaller house.

The fierce summer blazed on, and Jim's life varied not one whit from day to day. He struggled on with his moonshee, drilled and disciplined the battery for his absent major, settled himself in his new house, dined at mess *en garçon* (which he found, rather to his surprise, he thoroughly enjoyed), and read his Bagh-o-bahar and Baital Pachchisi assiduously. Then dust-storms swept the country; the clouds banked up and burst in peals of thunder. The monsoon broke and the rains poured down. The treacherous Indian autumn had commenced.

The war that had brought so many beside himself to India was practically over; the retreat was being carried out. Two years before his heart had beat excitedly at the scare of war; he had come to India full of hope. Scare had followed scare; but not for months after his arrival had war been actually declared. He had applied to go—thousands had applied—and now the war was over, and he had missed it. He need have been in no desperate hurry, after all. But his thoughts had ceased to dwell upon those things; the soreness of his court-martial had passed away somewhat; he could even think dispassionately of Colonel Dare; and his high hopes had dwindled down to examinations in the vernacular and periodical inspections. The battery had given him plenty of employment, and he was interested in the work; his examination he meant to read for in earnest now, and pass if he could. In spite of three or four attacks of fever, he lived on cheerfully, forgetting all unpleasantness in the past and looking forward to his wife's return as the happy ending of a leaveless summer and the happy beginning of a season of enjoyment.

She came at last, radiant, happy, lovely—all her health and strength restored, the bloom of her beauty as fresh and charming as it had ever been.

She was full of her doings and amusements; she had spent a very pleasant time, she said, and had enjoyed her stay immensely; but Tainee, she averred, was rather a dull place, and for many reasons she was glad to get back. She did not add that an outrunning of the constable beyond immediate hope of capture had curtailed her visit: that was a minor reason which would probably explain itself in time.

There were now, as Lucy said, only a few weeks of moderate heat to endure, and then—then the winter season would begin with all its attendant gaiety.

One by one the various celebrities began to return, and Lucy hailed each fresh arrival with delight. Soon the place began to fill rapidly, and the leading spirits announced a subscription ball in the Kursaal. Then callers became more and more numerous, until Jim began to feel that the lonely hot weather he had spent was indeed a thing of the dismal past.

The rains had ceased, and the sun shone out with some of his past ferocity, as if spitefully reluctant to part with his power. It was hot still, and fever was abundant.

Little Jim, who had come back from Tainee so altered in appearance and improved in intelligence that Jim had hardly known him, began to lose his colour again. Instead of sitting up in Judith's arms, looking about him with eyes full of wonderment and interest, as he had done at first, he began to whine and

whimper, dropping his head upon Judith's shoulder and refusing to be amused.

"Oh, I don't think it's anything," Lucy said; but Judith feared something was the matter, and Jim went for the doctor. The doctor confirmed Judith's fears: little Jim had a slight touch of fever.

This unfortunately happened the day before the ball, and, instead of getting well during the night like a considerate child, little Jim woke in the morning hot, fretful, and evidently unhappy.

The evening came. The ball dress hung upon a wicker stand in Lucy's room; Judith had put the last few finishing touches to it, and Lucy was standing by, glancing alternately at it and her own face in the glass. It was a beautiful dress—a far more beautiful face.

She was ready dressed when Jim came into her room in a lamentable state of preparation—or want of it.

"Why, Jim," she exclaimed, "you're not ready, and the carriage is at the door."

"The doctor has just been, and he says the boy is not so well to-night—far from well, in fact. Lucy, I'm afraid he's worse than we thought."

"Why, he's only a little feverish; he'll be all right in the morning. I heard the doctor say, over and over again, that we need not be the least anxious. But do go and get ready, there's a good fellow."

"I don't wish to go to-night, Lucy."

"Not go!"

"No; I couldn't. I couldn't be away when the poor little chap is ill; he might get worse."

"This is too ridiculous!" Lucy said, with tears of disappointment starting to her eyes; "it's too annoying. We could easily be sent for if we were wanted; it's not more than a mile."

"A mile might make all the difference; but if it were a hundred yards I would not, could not go."

"The doctor said there was no cause for anxiety."

"I have none—as yet."

She argued and protested and implored, but it was no use; Jim was as firm as a rock, and, as she told him, as obstinate as a mule. She could go if she liked, he said, there was not the slightest reason why she should not, but he would stay at home.

"And mind the baby," she sneered. She was fast getting angry at his persistence.

He did not answer.

"Do you expect me to go there alone in an open carriage?" she demanded.

"I have got a closed one for you; but I'll drive to the door with you, if you like."

"A nice state you're in to drive to the door; and I can't wait while you dress. Will you come later on?"

"I will not promise, Lucy."

"You want to stay at home and flirt with Judith," she laughed contemptuously.

"Poking fun at me will do no good," he replied; "and you are wasting time."

His coolness exasperated her. "No," she cried, "no one would accuse *you* of flirting, if they do of other things," and she flung out of the room.

The very walls rang with her words as he sat alone trying to read, but listening instead for sounds from

the other side of the house; the very walls repeated her words and echoed and re-echoed them, flinging them in his teeth as she had done. The whole scene of his court-martial, the face of the president, those of the members and witnesses, rose up one by one before him, and he could hear the accusation against him slowly repeated over and over again a hundred times. He could hear himself pleading his innocence, now before the court, now before his uncle; he could hear himself protesting it to Lucy. He could remember every word of her answer to him then, and now——

He made his bearer stay within call outside his window; and, as the clock on his mantel-shelf struck each half-hour, he visited the room where his sick child lay.

The night wore on.

In the distance he could just catch the faint echoes of the dance music, close at hand the wailings of his child and the soothing songs that Judith was singing to it. He was a sad man that night. It was pitiable to see the tiny fingers clasping and unclasping themselves in petty misery; pitiable to see so small a thing suffering so much; to feel the heat of its little body; to watch the blinking eyes trying vainly to close in sleep; to hear the piteous little cries and to know that nothing could be done in answer to their meaningless appeals. It was a sad experience to look at the puckered lips and flushed face. But there was another and a sadder experience that honest Jim was to suffer in addition.

The night wore on.

The music became more and more distinct as other

sounds died out of the breathless air ; but a noiseless thing was speeding on its way throughout the length and breadth of the land, from bazaar to bazaar, from mouth to mouth, on wings swifter than those on which the telegraph can fly—a thing that spreads and spreads, covering thousands of miles in a single day, no one knows how—a thing called news.

The night wore on, and Jim sat and watched.

The baby's cries were getting fainter ; the strains of the happy music louder. The doctor, in full evening dress, had called for the second time since Vraille's watch began, and his report was favourable. The news that had started at sundown was spreading, spreading, spreading, getting nearer and nearer every minute.

The night wore on.

The grey mists were curling over the ground. The last few bars of the last waltz were being played, and the ball was nearly over. Judith's voice was still. The news was approaching.

The morning broke, and the sun had fairly started on another of its brilliant courses. The child was sound asleep ; Judith was dozing. All was well : the bearer in attendance might go.

The watcher rose from his chair and listened. There was a voice at the gate which he recognised as Herbert Rook's, and in answer to it Jim heard his wife say, " Good night—or morning rather."

She stood before him, a vision of dishevelled loveliness. His bearer rushed excitedly into the room—

" Sahib, Sahib ! Great news ! The tribes have risen in revolt and massacred the white envoy. The war will all break out afresh !"

CHAPTER VI.

HIS CHANCE.

THE sleepy summer awoke into activity. The treaty proclaiming peace had been ignored ; England's envoy had been murdered, and the war that had already cost so many lives must now begin again. Throughout the length and breadth of the land flashed incessant orders ; the very air seemed to breathe of preparation ; staff and departmental officers talked of nothing but organisation ; concentration and mobilisation followed ; occupation commenced before evacuation was complete, and retreat recoiled into advance. The dusty columns wending their slow way back to India, decimated and inert after their famous return march, were met by fresh faces eager for the horrors of which they had only heard but never seen ; the trains rolled in and discharged their freights ; the great trunk roads were occupied with marching men and congested with incessant traffic ; and even the rough tracks leading to the front were soon crowded with troops and stores, vehicles of all sorts, lumber and impedimenta, driven cattle and beasts of burden. One thought dominated the minds of men ; one desire impelled them in one direction ; their one desire was to advance. From the pleasure resorts in the cool hills men flocked to join their stations ; out

from home they came, struggling to be first in the field, eager for active service.

Obedience to orders was not enough, applications for employment in any capacity filled the post-bags and were delivered in shoals. Vraille among the number wrote his letter with a trembling hand and took it to his major.

"What you too?" asked that officer, laughing; "and how about the young 'un?"

He did not ask, "How about your wife?" which struck Vraille as odd; but the fact was that there was a general impression in the station, though Vraille did not know it, that Mrs. Vraille was a woman well able to take care of herself.

"I won't apply if you don't wish it," said Jim, slowly; "but there seems little chance now of our being sent, and I should like to go."

He put it in that way; but if he had said he was burning to go, calculating every chance, living in hourly hope of being sent, he would have spoken no more than the truth.

"Most of us would like to go," said the major.

"Most of us have no bad mark against our names that we would like to wipe out." He was getting excited, and in another minute would have flashed out in one of those old impulsive bursts of passion which were so far less common with him now than formerly; but the major cut him short.

"Still harping on that old grievance," he said; "it's idiotic. But look here, if you're bent on this business I think I see my way to help you. I've got now in my pocket a letter from an old friend of mine, asking me if

I can recommend a man of certain qualities and character for his personal staff. He's a curious old fellow, you know, very touchy upon certain subjects, and prides himself upon his independence; he binds me to strict secrecy; still I am obliged to ask if you would accept such an appointment if it came your way."

"Accept!" cried Jim, starting to his feet and waving his application in the air. "Accept! only try me!"

"Well, well, don't get excited, and don't chuck that letter away; give it to me and I will send it on. I believe they want men for the Transport, and you may as well have more irons in the fire than one."

"This is most awfully good of you," said Jim, twirling his moustache nervously and trying his utmost to appear calm.

"Tush," said the other, "I owe you a good turn, Jim, that's the truth. You've done your work like a man, and pulled the battery through the hot weather and some decidedly difficult official worries pluckily and well. Hallo! what are you blushing like a girl for?—it's a silly trick you've got, old fellow, and doesn't become you."

Praise is sweet. Jim felt its sweetness all the more for its rarity; it was the first time he had heard any reference to his work. He could never take his troubles or successes home with him, for Lucy could not understand his difficulties, she told him, and objected, she said, to having stable-talk brought into her drawing-room. Balls and dinners, dresses and tennis tournaments, were suitable subjects for discussion, but not

"shop." Well-tutored as he fancied himself in the ways of the world, he was childishly simple enough to be pleased at praise. He felt his folly and blushed.

"You did my work for me while I was away as I like it done," continued the major. "You are a reliable fellow, though compliments are not much in my way, and I shall submit your name."

This man had formed his own opinion of his captain, and was glad of a chance of practically expressing it.

Vraille jumped upon his horse and galloped off. His chance had come; he knew it, he felt it; his reputation, perhaps his brevet, was as good as gained. Lucy would congratulate him; she would be pleased, and think more highly of him than ever when he told her of the compliments that had been paid him. Ah, it was worth the long, long months of weary work; it was gratifying in the extreme to have its worth acknowledged. He felt proud of himself, and happy to think that his wife would be prouder still. He was happier then than he had been for many a long day, for somehow life lately had not been altogether linked sweetness long drawn out. There was always a feeling in his heart that something was wanting in his home, something missing; and Jim was bothered with the thought that that something must be due to a cross-grained trait in his own uncomfortable character, which it was his bounden duty to discover and rectify, but could not. He was not a ladies' man; he had not the knack of putting things in an agreeable or interesting way, so that his wife cared to listen. When he talked, he always seemed to be talking over her head, which was pedantic. He

had tried reading aloud his favourite authors to her, but she said he always selected the wrong time for doing so, and his utmost elocutionary efforts only resulted in producing boredom. His ideas of romance were not hers, and at one time he had really imagined himself so very romantic, and marriage the acme of romance. Marriage had opened his eyes to that and a great many other of his mistakes. "Mea culpa, mea culpa," he had sung so repeatedly that he believed in the moral of his song. "How about the young 'un?" his major had asked. Well, as he thought it out, he felt pretty certain his fault did not lie there. In his younger days, he had never been partial to children; indeed, he had lived far too rapidly to give them a thought. But this child, he was surprised to find, occupied more and more of his thoughts with each succeeding day. Puny, feeble little bit of humanity that it was, it partially filled that void which in his foolish fancy he was always imagining existed in his life. The sight of the boy in Judith's arms at once pained him and tended to assuage that unaccountable hungry longing his heart so often felt. What idiocy! What did he hunger for? Was it love? Surely not. Had he not his wife? And did he not love her? With his whole soul, he knew it.

He drew up at the door-step of his house and threw the reins to his syce. As he walked across the hall he sighed. In the short interval of time between riding from the lines to his bungalow his spirits had dropped from exultation to something like despair. Who could like a man with a temperament so absurdly mercurial as that?

He found his wife in the drawing-room, and, seating himself beside her, took her hand in his and kissed it. She looked surprised.

"What is the matter?" she asked, stretching herself lazily and looking lovely as she did so.

"Lucy darling," he began, then stopped.

"Well?"

"I've some good news."

"For me?"

"N—no, not exactly; about myself."

"Passed your examination?"

She clasped her hands behind her head, and tilted her knees so as to bring the book on her lap into a position where she could read it.

"No, Lucy, I've not been up for my examination yet, you know, and in all probability never shall now; something better than that."

She lifted her eyes off her book as he stopped.

"I'm going to the front," he said shortly.

"When?" she asked.

"Directly, I suspect;" and then he told her all that he had heard in the morning, but cut his recital rather short, as he saw that her eyes wandered repeatedly in the direction of her book.

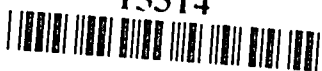
"Oh, you're not gone yet," she said when he had finished.

"But when I do go it will be at a moment's notice, Lucy, and it is as well to be prepared. I was thinking—I was thinking, dear, that it would be a good opportunity for you and the boy to take a trip home, and recruit. Perhaps your mother——"

"No, thank you!" she exclaimed hurriedly. "I

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have not the least desire to go home. I'd far rather wait in the Hills till you come back."

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"Very well," he replied thoughtfully; "only, Lucy, a hill station is a dangerous place for a young woman to spend her time in alone—a young married woman, I mean. People are very censorious out here, and don't mind much what they say. You are a very, very beautiful woman, my darling, and beautiful women excite jealousy. From sheer ignorance you might get yourself talked about in a way that, if you only knew, would horrify you. Many and many an innocent woman has had her character torn in shreds in the Hills without her suspecting it in the least. Your danger, my dearest girl, is your innocence, and it is better for you to know at starting what to expect, that is all. I can trust you, thank God, anywhere—anywhere; but it is other people's honesty I distrust. Never give them a handle to catch hold of, however slight, or they'll use it to a certainty, and to good purpose."

"Why, you silly man," she said, "I know all about that—probably a good deal better than you do yourself."

"If you knew—you do know, Lucy—how jealous I am of your every look and word, you would not laugh. It is absurd of me, I know; but the thought of leaving you and the boy—our boy—alone, has—has knocked me out of time," he concluded, lamely. "The thought," he continued, throwing one arm round her neck and bending his head down to look into her eyes,— "the thought that I might some day come back, as other and better men than I have done, to find my

wife different to what I left her, is absurd, isn't it? Say so; say it's absurd, Lucy!"

"Of course it's absurd," she answered in rather a frightened voice.

"It would break my heart. You'll never forget me, or cease to think of me as having been kind to you sometimes. You won't let the admiration of other—" he had almost said "men," but substituted "people"—"steal your love from me for a single moment, will you? And, Lucy, the little chap; you'll look after him well, *well*, won't you, while I'm away?"

He caught one of her hands, and his own trembled as he held it; his mouth was twitching, his eyes flashing that peculiar flame which always frightened her a little. His compliments were gross, his manner almost fierce, and certainly embarrassing; besides, his insinuations were insulting and made her angry, although she was afraid to show anger. Certainly he was not a pleasant sort of husband, and a man, after all, not so easy to trifle with as she had always supposed. She made her promises to him categorically and wished that he would leave her alone.

Presently he rose, and asked whether the boy was asleep, then, renewing his admonitions of strict secrecy concerning the promised appointment, left the room.

One other incident added to a thousand that had gone before, proving the difficulty of getting his wife to take more than a casual interest in his affairs, and his own incapacity to impart enthusiasm or any other emotion to a heart that he grieved to think beat separately from, though not exactly out of unison with, his own; one more rasp at the link that bound them

together; one more tug at his faith; one more twist at the instrument of torture that he felt was slowly crushing the vitality out of him! Poor Jim was very despondent as he walked across to the other side of the house where the nursery was. His way lay through his wife's bedroom, and a ball-dress lying on her bed reminded him that there was another dance that night. Why was it that he no longer seemed to care for all these gaieties? Time was when he had never seemed to have had enough; and not so very long ago, after all—about the time when Uncle Ben had told him that he might call himself lucky if, at forty, he could count his friends on the fingers of one hand. He had laughed then, for he had believed that the value of those five would be as nothing compared to the worth of one whom he was about to gather to his heart. He was not forty yet, certainly, but where were those five that Uncle Ben had talked about? Uncle Ben himself—one, yes; his major—well, yes, two. The third? Oh! what did it matter? Where was that *one*?

Judith's honest face met him at the nursery door.

"Well, Judith, how's the young 'un?"

"Beautiful, bless 'un," she replied.

He sat down on the floor beside his child and began to make a series of extraordinary and unsoldierly noises with his mouth for its amusement. The baby was but a baby, and could only express his appreciation in a 'wide-eyed stare; but presently something like a ripple of merriment passed across his pale little face, and Captain James Vraille, R.A., grinned with delight.

"Lord love 'un," cried Judith, "blessed if he didn't nearly smile."

"I think he did quite," said Jim with animation; "never saw him do that before. How soon do babies smile as a rule, Judith?"

They discussed the question for some time, Jim meanwhile making more noises and grimaces, until a call from her mistress summoned Judith from the room.

He had not been able to tell Lucy of his major's expressed gratitude for his summer's work—and for the moment he had wanted to tell some one—but he soon forgot his own wants and wishes while prattling to his baby.

In this way was Jim's egoism always checked, and his confidences gradually stifled until they had almost ceased to exist at all.

He played with his child until Judith came back and said it was time for it to go to bed; and then Jim went away and had no one to play with, no one to talk to. He busied himself in his room looking over his things and putting on one side what he thought suitable for a field kit, until Lucy called to him that it was time to dress for dinner. They were to dine with the Commissioner—a big gun, who could on no account be kept waiting—and afterwards they were to go to the dance. The dinner was of course an important matter; but the dance was expected to be a very dismal affair—so many men had left for the front.

Vraille had been cautioned on no account to miss going, for trousers were at a premium. He, therefore, found himself in course of time following his wife's trailing skirts into the Commissioner's handsome drawing-room. After shaking hands with their host, and hostess, Lucy sank gracefully into a chair, round which half a dozen men immediately clustered, while

Jim, in a corner, began to assume the various attitudes affected by men during the *mauvais quart-d'heure* when they have no one near them to talk to.

It was five minutes past the appointed dinner-time, when a girl, whom he fancied he had met before somewhere, entered the room. While he was cudgelling his brains to recall her name, the Commissioner's wife sailed towards him, and, motioning with her fan, led him across the room and murmured an introduction to the unknown. He did not catch the name, although he listened with all his ears, but it sounded like "Clare."

She wore *pince-nez* and held herself rather haughtily erect. That was all he had time to notice before she held out her hand to him, and in a low yet frank voice, with just a suspicion of rippling laughter in it, said, "This is a very pleasant surprise, Captain Vraille. Not a week in the country and I meet an old face. Eight thousand miles are nothing, after all."

Jim expressed his gratification as best he could, wondering who on earth she was, and hoping he could recollect (he felt he was on the point of doing so every moment) before he should be obliged to ask her name. The tailing off in strict order of precedence gave him time to collect his memories, but he found himself taking his seat next to his short-sighted companion as much at sea as ever. Luckily he knew the lady on his other side, and whispered the necessary question.

"Miss Dare—Miss Edith Dare—daughter of Colonel Dare, whose sister, Mrs. Phelps, married Major Phelps of the Eleventh Horse, you know—just arrived—staying with her aunt—father ordered to the front—went through the day before yesterday."

Long before this full and accurate information (all information about people in India is full and accurate) had come to an end, the blood was surging through Jim's veins, dyeing his cheeks and forehead crimson and making him feel hot all over. He applied himself to his soup, and half turned his back on the girl it was his business to amuse and entertain. What should he do? What if she had noticed his horrible confusion? Why could he not comport himself calmly in a difficulty like any other man? He envied Mr. Rook his calm composure as he leant towards Lucy and smilingly whispered something in her ear which seemed to please her. He never had been calm and composed; he was an ass.

Still the matter had to be seen through somehow; and, after all, he had done nothing that he feared being found out, for all India knew his story. The girl herself of course knew it, and had met him very graciously. He finished his soup, drank a sip or two of champagne, ate a morsel of bread, squared himself in his chair, began a sentence, gulped it down again, coughed, and at last got out—

“And how do you like India, Miss Dare?” There was not another man sitting at that table, he thought to himself, who would have put such a confoundedly stupid question to a girl as that.

Miss Dare turned towards him, and in her low, pleasant voice, intermingled with that rippling laughter, which had at first struck him as sweet to hear but now sounded like soothing music, answered his silly question with a string of bright and interested replies. She recounted a little anecdote of her voyage, laughingly lamented the

heat, told him where she lived, supposed that people saw a great deal of one another in India, said she intended to make the very best of things and enjoy herself, and smiled as if she thoroughly understood what enjoyment meant.

Before dinner was half over, Jim found himself talking almost as freely as he could talk to Judith Foresight. Somehow they had got on the subject of the baby, and just as he was saying, "He's a jolly little beggar, you must come and see him," there was a pause in the general conversation which rendered the remark audible to the whole table. Mr. Rook tittered into his napkin, the Commissioner smiled, Lucy frowned across the table, Miss Dare said boldly, "That I certainly shall, Captain Vraile; I expect from what you say he's a dear little fellow." But he had had enough of babies and changed the conversation. It would only be polite, he supposed, to ask after her father. He did so, and discovered that the colonel was now a widower with an only daughter on his hands, namely Edith. "And then," explained Miss Dare, "his turn came for India, and we had no sooner landed than he was ordered to the front. He rushed off and left me where I am. He was in a tremendous hurry, too; he always is."

"He's quite right," said Jim, loyally, "to go on as quickly as he can."

"To be sure," she replied; "but he's impetuous, much too impetuous. Sometimes," she said very slowly, removing her *pince-nez* and looking her companion full in the face with a pair of honest eyes that he noticed were of hazel hue,—“sometimes he does things impetu-

ously which he has very good reason to repent afterwards."

He removed his eyes from hers and bent his head, pretending to pick a crumb out of his lap. He understood her perfectly; she, at least, had never doubted him, and she meant him to know it. Had his thoughts been put into words, they would have been something like—"She can't help being the old fool's daughter, and somehow she has made me feel uncommonly happy."

Then they talked about music and pictures, the latest London play and the last novel, until the ladies retired, and Jim was left alone to his reflections and a subaltern's prattle about a polo pony.

In the drawing-room afterwards he had an opportunity of studying Miss Dare at a distance, though none of talking to her. He had already noticed that she was rather a plain girl; but she showed to more advantage while standing than when seated, for she had a slim, graceful figure, and her erect carriage made her look taller than she was. "Not at all striking-looking girl," thought Jim, "though very far from a bread-and-butter miss—English, honest, and fearless; not a bit like her father;" and then he thought no more about her, but watched his wife with admiring eyes, taking mental notes of her superiority over every other woman in the room in point of loveliness and costume, and listening indolently to the idle chatter that was going on around him. Lucy's face, he noticed, was aglow with animation, and he felt a little pained to think how seldom she wore that becoming expression in his company. Some one asked her to play—she did so; Jim knew the tune well; it

was one of the six that she practised for such occasions. Then, to his surprise, Miss Dare sat down to the piano and began to sing. She sang from memory, and every one listened with unusual interest and attention. Through Lucy's performance all the ladies had talked, Jim noticed, as loudly as possible without actually shouting; now they were silent. Genuine applause followed the song, and the Commissioner's wife had the bad taste, as Lucy afterwards put it, to press for an encore verse. The girl looked up and smiled, ran her fingers up and down the keys, and suddenly burst into a wild German song that Vraille had never heard before. He did not know a word of German, but he felt certain it was a love-song, and it seemed to him a very sad one. There was a frantic misery about some of the wailing notes of the refrain which followed each verse that seemed to touch his inmost heart and melt it in pity. He had never heard such singing or such a song; he could hardly bear to listen; it made him utterly miserable; and, only a few minutes before, this same young lady had been making him feel as gay as that silly subaltern with his polo pony. More songs followed, but he heard none of them; and when, an hour afterwards, he was seated beside his wife, driving to the dance, he still heard those wild sad notes of misery in the trot of his horse's hoofs upon the roadway.

"Well," said his wife, giving him a push with the end of her fan; "we're very thoughtful to-night. Miss Dare, eh? Never tell me again that you are not a flirt."

"I!" exclaimed poor Jim, who had no more notion of flirting than of flying.

"Yes, you, injured innocence; and a pretty figure you cut at table. She was laughing at you, Jim, and trying her best to make you appear silly. She succeeded, too."

"Well, perhaps so, Lucy; and what then? She has not gained much."

But his wife had thrown fresh light on his understanding; he saw the table laughing at him once again, and blushed to himself in the dark to think that he had been so easily led into making an ass of himself.

"She's old Dare's daughter," he said; "the man that tried me, you remember."

"Naturally she owes you a grudge. Every one knows that."

"Do you think she was trying dodges on me, then?"

"Of course I do."

"Why? How?"

Reasons are not so easy to give as assertions to make, and Lucy changed the subject with—

"How should I know? Ask her."

All the harmony of the little German song was gone, and now the rattle of the horse's hoofs only beat out discords.

Considering the paucity of men, the dance was a great success. The band played its merriest, the waltzers twirled, partners perspired, the fun was at its height. Not a hundred miles away, fathers and brothers, husbands and sons, were toiling along the westward roads to glory or dishonour, disease or death; but what mattered that? In India of all places it behoves one to be merry while one can.

Lucy waltzed divinely, and never *looked* hot, whatever she might feel. She did not suffer either from prickly heat, which gave her an immense advantage over the majority of her sex, for she could wear her dresses low without fear of her shoulders becoming disfigured with a rash during the exercise. Others, for the most part, were not so fortunate. Mr. Rook, too, always looked sleek and cool, whatever the mercury might register. His close black hair never ruffled, his linen never got limp; he was a charming partner in every way, and when not actually dancing, could pay the prettiest compliments with an easy grace that gave them all the air of actual sincerity. Mr. Rook was a rising man, with influence, and a thorough gentleman, with two thousand rupees a month, so mothers liked to see their daughters dancing with him; but such is the perversity of disinterested human nature, he preferred dancing with Lucy. Lucy's popularity with her sex was not proportionate to the number of times he did so in an evening, and on this particular evening was rapidly on the decline.

It was hot in the rooms, and only natural that they should take a stroll in the grounds. Jim saw the curtains fall behind the retreating pair.

"Who is that beautiful woman just gone out?" a voice behind him asked.

"No other than Lovely Loo, I suspect," another answered.

He turned sharply, and beheld two unknown faces. The place was full of unknown faces in those busy times.

Was she as well known as that? Did people dare

to call her by an offensive nickname? Was the reputation of her beauty bandied about from mouth to mouth like that of an actress at home? It was horrible. He could have struck the man. He would take her home, away from the reach of insult.

"Lucy, Lucy," he whispered, when he had found her after a search through the grounds, "I want to speak to you—just a minute."

She rose from her seat with an apology to her partner, and followed him a few steps.

"Come home," he said, catching at her hand, "come home, dearest; we have had enough of this. It is intolerably weary work; you must be tired."

"Come home?" she repeated. "When the night has hardly begun? Why, I am enjoying myself immensely, and I'm not one bit tired. You mean you are bored. Come, don't be selfish just this once, there's a dear."

"All right," he said, and, flinging her hand from him, turned his back upon her and walked away.

"You don't look as if you were enjoying yourself as you should," said a musical voice in his ear, as he stood inside the room again, wearily watching the dancing.

"I'm not, Miss Dare, and that's the truth; I hate and loathe these masquerades—these hollow shams of amusement—these Indian hotbeds of insult and scandal. You'll find it all out for yourself some day. I'd sooner see paint than smiles on some women's faces."

"Good gracious!" said the girl, edging away from him.

Had he been enjoying his supper? Had her father been right in his accusations, after all?

"Don't think I'm mad," he said, smiling grimly, and noticing her action; "I'm not mad usually, but mad, perhaps, just now. Sometimes the unspoken lies of this country of so-called romance are borne in upon me very strongly, that's all. Why did you come here? What made your father subject you to a life in India? Has he ever soldiered here before?"

The question led to explanation, the explanation to a set of Lancers, the set of Lancers to no clearer mutual understanding.

He did not enjoy his evening, but Lucy did.

"You look lovelier and lovelier every time I see you," murmured her partner.

The delicacy of the compliment sent a thrill of pleasure through her.

"Don't be so stupid," she said deprecatingly.

"Hot weathers," he pursued, in smooth, even tones, "have no effect upon you, positively. How do you manage it? Give me your receipt, and I'll make my fortune."

She laughed, and said she had none.

"Of course not; one can see that with half an eye. Do you never feel afraid, Mrs. Vraille, of all the bitter enemies you have made in this place?"

"Enemies! No; what enemies? Why should I?"

"Women hate you, my dear lady; and there are lots of women here, you know."

"Hate me, do they?"

This was gratifying to the last degree.

"If you want to make friends, Miss Aphrodite, be stupid; if you want to keep them, be ugly, or at any rate plain."

She had never heard of Aphrodite, but she felt that the allusion was well meant, and smiled.

"But I'm *not* stupid," she said.

"Precisely," he replied, dryly. "Now look here, dear Lucy—Mrs. Vraille, I mean; I beg pardon—I want you to manage something cleverly."

Lucy looked as bright as possible.

"I am thinking of giving a little entertainment in my bungalow—dinner, dance, supper, all premeditated impromptu"—he paused to give his little shaft of wit time to strike her understanding; but, seeing that it had missed its mark, continued—"but I want it *choice*; by choice I mean chosen, and very carefully chosen—the wheat winnowed from the chaff."

"Ye—es, quite so," said Lucy, dubiously.

"All unnecessary superfluity removed."

She was slow to take any hint, and he saw that nothing but plain-speaking would serve.

"No dull people, you know; no awkward chaperons, no tiresome fathers and husbands."

She would be delighted. When was it to be?

About a fortnight or three weeks hence.

"Oh, easy enough!" she exclaimed. "Jim will have gone by then."

"Gone? Where to?"

"To the front. He's been offered an appointment under General —; oh! but I forgot."

A low, pensive whistle broke from Mr. Rook's lips.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"Nothing, nothing; I had thought as much all along, that's all. But tell me the particulars; it is interesting, this."

She told him all she could remember, proud to let him see how clever she could be when she chose.

"But be sure," she said, "you don't mention it to a soul. It's a dead secret at present, though you seemed to have guessed it."

"Certainly not," said Mr. Rook, to whom the information came as an utter surprise.

No one, to hear his answer, would have supposed that the matter was important to him; and no one, to look at him, would have imagined that honest Lucy had ruined her husband's chance for ever.

CHAPTER VII.

GOOD-BYE.

THE Rooks are an ancient and honourable family. They are, too, a clever race, and, without exception, popular, it being a sort of etiquette among them always to live on the best terms possible with their neighbours, never to make unnecessary enemies, and at the same time to push themselves well to the front. They deserve to get on ; and they do !

Of Lord Chesscastle's numerous younger sons, two had found their way to India. The Honourable Percy of the Guards filled a dignified position on the Viceroyal Staff, while the Honourable Herbert, as we have seen, was a marked man in the Civil Service. But Percy Rook, as the family representative of the army, had a few decorations, and, if possible, a V.C. to get, before he could attempt to emulate the distinguished rôles played by his military forefathers ; Herbert had yet to bring himself into prominent notice on a special mission. The family name was as good as ever, but could not be lived on, and the family credit in more senses than one was a little on the wane. The war offered golden opportunities to be snapped up, and the Rooks were on the look-out.

The brothers bore one another no extraordinary affection ; but as they could slide up their respective scales in harmonic progression without interfering with

one another's interests, if either saw a fit opportunity of doing the other a good turn, he invariably seized it, keeping a debtor and creditor account of benefits received and bestowed, and making a careful mental note of the balance.

Naturally enough, Percy pined for a post that would offer the best opportunities of advancement and distinction with the least possible inaction and discomfort between whiles; and Herbert knew that his brother had set his heart on obtaining the vacant billet now being offered to this outsider Vraile. Mr. Rook, the civilian, understood diplomacy if he understood anything, and, better still, thoroughly understood the character of the general with whom the appointment rested.

An hour's cogitation evolved two diplomatic notes—one to his brother, the other to a wire-puller of no mean order, whom he knew tolerably well, and had once served to good purpose. He posted these notes, smiled complacently, and went to bed. The next day he told every one he met of the good fortune about to befall his friend Jimmy Vraile.

Herbert Rook was undoubtedly the most desirable acquaintance within a radius of five or six hundred miles. Every one liked him; it was impossible to help it; he had a sweet, soothing way of saying that it was hot in the sun or cool under the punkah, which at once suggested confidence and solicited sympathy, and he always knew the latest news sooner than any one else. He played a good rubber of whist, and to watch him at lawn-tennis was an education; he was a divine waltzer, an excellent horseman, and a most trustworthy organiser of dinner-parties, picnics, tournaments, or

concerts; he thoroughly understood menus and ball programmes; and, in fact, for dexterity and tact in bringing the right people together at the right times and places, and in the right order—an all-important consideration—as well as for amusing them when he got them there, he had not his equal in all India. He could turn a verse for an album, sing an Italian love-song, playing his own accompaniment, paint a scene for the theatre, or take a minor part which no one wished to fill, with a grace and good-nature that made him beloved of all who knew him.

It was only natural that when Lucy found that her wit and beauty attracted an undue share of his attention, and saw other women in the ball-room or on the Mall frowning at her, she felt constrained to make the very best of her opportunities, and cement with her brightest smiles the intimacy that was springing up apace between them every day. It was delightful to sit out in the cool night air, between or even during the dances, and listen to his caressing voice, while in the mellow light of Chinese lanterns and fairy lamps she could watch the flash of jealous eyes less beautiful than her own. It was charming; and it was still more charming when, beyond the reach of captious ears, he would occasionally become bold, and burst forth into fearless rhapsodies on her attainments and her charms. He put things in a way that made them positively impossible to resent; he understood women and how to charm them. He never talked about himself; he talked about her—that was the whole secret.

Jim talked about absurd things—ethics and ideals, fundamental principles and convictions, and a number

of other themes equally impossible to comprehend, and equally dull. Mr. Rook was never dull; he understood life—the real every-day life of positive enjoyment *in esse* and possible enchantment *in posse*; he understood men and manners and realities, and how to make the best of them, too; he never droned out speculations on impossibilities, or looked upon the seamy side of things.

This little entertainment of his, for example, got up, he told her, especially on her own account, and being put off *de die in diem* (though her meditation was not in Latin) until she should fix a day most convenient for herself, was tempting in the extreme and occupied her thoughts. She must manage it somehow; but there were difficulties. For one thing she would be obliged to have a new dress for the occasion, and, though ordered, the date of its completion was still uncertain. But she had not as yet mentioned the subject to Jim. He might make some ridiculous objection which would give rise to a little scene; she hated little scenes, and hoped by procrastination to avoid the necessity of forcing one into existence: the time taken by Government officials in making up their minds was monstrous.

At last Mr. Rook could wait no longer, and himself fixed the date and issued his invitations—verbally. She wanted to go, but kept putting off the day for obtaining Jim's sanction. People were beginning to talk of his appointment; it was extraordinary how things got about! She heard some one allude to it on the Mall; then again at the Gymkhana the subject had been mentioned in her hearing. A young subaltern—rather a friend of hers—named Hicks, congratulated her, and said that he was “dead nuts” on her husband's

charger Mustapha, and, "if there was to be a deal, meant to cut in."

It certainly was getting about; still, as Jim was evidently ignorant of the fact that he was a subject of conversation, not to say interest, for the time being, she held her tongue like a wise woman. He, meanwhile, was making every preparation for immediate departure, busying himself all day long with one thing and another, and looking positively brisk and cheerful.

"There," he said to her one evening just before starting for the theatre, "I'm ready now to be off at a moment's notice."

"And quite glad to leave me all alone."

His face fell.

"I'm very sorry to leave you," he said, gravely, "more sorry than I can tell you."

"Oh, yes!" was her ironical reply.

"Not all the telling in the world, I fear, would make you believe me, Lucy."

She noticed the bitterness in his tone, and told him not to be cross and spoil her evening.

"But," he continued rather wearily, "at least you will appreciate the arrangements I have made for you while I am away." Then he told her. She was to live on where she was until the commencement of the hot weather, when she would proceed to the Hills. He had all his plans—houses, disposal of furniture, domestic arrangements, and the very journeys to and fro—cut and dried, it seemed. She was quite satisfied, and much interested, as he had said she would be.

They went to the theatre, and Lucy thoroughly enjoyed her evening after all.

The news of Jim's possible selection for the vacant appointment was by this time common property, and when some one at last congratulated him personally on his luck he looked scared. Lucy, when he asked her if she had repeated to any one what he had told her, at first stoutly maintained her innocence, for Jim put his questions to her, as she affirmed, with such brutal ferocity that he frightened her; but afterwards, when he had calmed down a little and could listen to reason, she admitted having partially alluded to the possibility of his filling the post, knowing full well that in doing so there could not, of course, be the slightest atom of harm. Jim sighed, and said he hoped it would be all right.

He went on hoping until he saw the appointment of Captain the Honourable Percy Rook of the Body-guard in the "Gazette."

"It's no good, Lucy," he groaned, "trying for anything in the service without interest; it's no good working or hoping; you might as well try to swim without arms—you can keep your head above water, but you can't get on an inch. I'm sorry you said anything about it, as it so happens, because it has made us both look more or less foolish. But *that* did not lose me my chance, and I'm not so unjust or so stupid as to suppose it did; it was my want of interest, for one thing, and the star I was born under, for another. It's a pity, but let us try to forget all about it."

He did his best to forget all about it; but one day his Major jogged his memory most unpleasantly.

"The thing got about somehow," he said to his Captain, tartly; "it got to General ——'s ears that

you had been selected on my recommendation and authority. All the good you've done by tattling, when I warned you not to, is to have lost a capital billet for yourself and get me a nasty snub. I don't like snubs."

Jim took his wiggling silently. What could he say? He had committed an indiscretion and knew it. His Major would not be likely to trust him very implicitly for the future—and Lucy? Well, she had meant no harm, and, as he had exonerated her once, it would be ungenerous and of little use to raise the question again; besides, he did not believe that a stray hint could possibly have done the whole mischief, even in India. No, it was his luck!

In due course Captain the Honourable Percy Rook, whose departure was duly chronicled in the daily papers as a subject of universal regret to Simla and general congratulation to the Field Force, rolled down the Himylayan Hills to take up his new duties on the Frontier. Captain James Vraille, occasionally sympathised with, took to his books again, and opened the "Baital Pachchisi" at the place where he had left off.

One man's gain is another's loss in any game, be it skittles, billiards, stocks, or war. The best go to the front, the weak to the wall, the one difficulty being to decide at the outset who are the best—a difficulty that can only be overcome by individual comparison. Comparison is arrived at by competition; competition is a great institution, but unfortunately James Vraille was no good at competition.

"I don't wish to complain," he said to his wife one

night when they happened to be at home alone together; "and a man who grumbles about his luck is usually a knock-kneed sort of chap, but it does seem hard sometimes that one thing after another should fail me. I suppose I'm an example of my own rule, and am morally weak. I *hate* failure," he exclaimed—this was only a few days after his resolution to forget his disappointment—"and to hate anything is a proof of weakness. Really strong men don't hate, or if they do, they keep their hatred under control, and don't talk about it. The man I should like to be is the calm, cool, quiet man who manages to get on without noise: the less noise a steam-engine makes, the quicker it goes; it is only at starting and pulling up that it puffs and blows; and ——"

"Oh! but I've often heard an engine make a lot of noise going quick—indeed I have," said Lucy; "whistle, for instance."

"There may be anguish in the whistle," he muttered to himself, "but not hatred."

"I don't believe you know anything about engines, as a matter of fact."

She rose out of her chair, and, stretching her shapely arms above her head, yawned, but yawned enchantingly as an animate statue of a weary Venus might yawn.

"Oh, I'm so tired," she said. "I've been up three nights running, you know, and I'm going to bed. Good night, dear."

She patted his grey head as she passed him and left the room.

There is something wrong about the man whose principal companions are his thoughts. Jim was very

often left alone with his thoughts, and sometimes he felt that if he could only give them expression instead of always bottling them up he would feel better, morally and physically. But the more he thought the less he wished to talk; and it seemed, too, that he was always thinking; the habit was growing on him apace—a pernicious habit, but one he found it impossible to throw off. A gape, a momentary digression on Lucy's part, was quite enough to dispel his ideas and banish all hope of fixing her interest. It was absurd of him to be so sensitive, and he struggled hard against his infirmity. But it was no good, his efforts were invariably failures; and little by little he felt that he was becoming more and more silent, more and more taciturn, more and more socially objectionable.

He often reviewed his past life, and wondered whether the gaiety of his fastest days had in reality been forced—whether the laughter and noise and fun of those times had ever actually formed part of his life. The old feeling that he had once tried to explain to Lucy, of living within himself a life different to what others saw, was growing on him rapidly. He was never himself now; he was always acting a part—trying to keep up appearances which he knew were false. Those subjects that really interested him were never mentioned at home, while things he knew nothing about were eagerly discussed by Lucy and her friends. But now and then, in the mess, and occasionally at the Club, he would launch out into a dissertation or join warmly in an argument and talk until he felt ashamed of his volubility.

His weekly letter to Uncle Ben was his safety-valve ; in these letters he said what he thought, and said it freely ; it was like talking to him, and Uncle Ben had always been a sympathetic listener. His uncle wrote back and told him that "over-much self-examination was the bane of existence," and that "healthy commingling with fellow-creatures and a just appreciation of their pleasures was the only source of contentment for the young." "Remember," he had said in his last letter, "that you have your life to live, and that it lasts at most a few score years. Old age lives in the past. If you have no pleasant past to look back upon, your old age will be miserable indeed ; and, after all, the making of one's pleasures and pains greatly rests with oneself. It is your *duty* to be as happy as you can, that your happiness may be imparted to others. Introspection is a subtle form of selfishness, and no selfishness can lead to happiness."

Why had he written like this ? No letter of his own, he felt sure, had supplied the text for such a sermon. True ; but the tone of them all for the past two years had led up to it. This Jim did not know.

It was all very well, he thought, and the truth of it was as clear as crystal ; but, despite his efforts to take the old gentleman's advice and mould his conduct on these axioms, he failed. As he grew older—and he seemed to have grown ten years older in two—the more important the world as a social problem seemed to him, and the less he understood it. Things that he had once fancied beautiful had turned out to be commonplace, pleasures were but penances, and hopes highways to disappointment. But others did not preach these

doctrines; others saw gold where he saw only tinsel; others found no difficulties in their paths, and laughed at him when he mistook amusement for duty. The world was as bright as ever if he would but recognise the fact; it was his own horn-eyed stupidity that blinded him. The fault lay with himself. He was a weak, puling dreamer, without a grain of manly common sense about him. "Come, shake yourself," he said out loud; "be as others are; look your neighbour boldly in the face, you are as good as he. Assert yourself; you have never done anything to be ashamed of." He actually got up and shook himself, as if in this way he could shake off yesterday's frowns. He set his face into a smile and looked at it in a glass. It looked positively idiotic. "Oh, come," he said, "you're not quite so bad as that as a general rule, I hope; the expression doesn't become you; try another." He did, and it was worse than the first, so he gave up practising pleasantries and threw himself into his chair again. His eyes roamed round the room and he noticed all the pretty knick-knacks; how tasteful it all was! but his expression did not change. He looked out of the open door into the night, and saw in the far distance Lucy Flight holding out her lovely arms to him in the little drawing-room at Cabstand Square, and his eyes dilated with pleasure at the remembrance of those delightful times. "Oh, it's all changed now," he groaned, "and I have only myself to blame." He picked up the book she had been reading and glanced his eye over a few pages—love, passion, revenge, poetic justice. She had marked her place with a ball programme, and in sheer indolence he opened that. The initials "H.R." were very prominently

conspicuous, and the lines about his mouth and eyes deepened as he replaced the card and laid the book aside. His expression now, had he glanced again in the glass, would hardly have pleased him.

A low cry came wailing through the silence of the house, followed by the notes of a crooning lullaby, and all was still again. The lines on his face as he listened faded and died out one by one, a smile played about the corners of his mouth, a soft light kindled in his eyes, which he half closed as if experiencing some pleasant sensation. He sunk his head upon his hand and thought. The little cry had turned the whole current of his thoughts. How still the house was; how silent the night; what a lonely man he felt himself to be; and yet, no, not quite alone.

A hurrying footstep pattered in the verandah; a pair of shoes were shuffled off; his bearer handed him a telegram.

As he had said, if he were ordered to the front at all, it would be at a moment's notice. The Transport Service was a poor exchange for service on the personal staff of a distinguished general, but better than nothing. The opportunity he had longed for had come at last. The order lay in his hand. In four-and-twenty hours he would be gone.

He stole on tip-toe into his wife's room. The punkah waved noiselessly above her bed; she slept soundly; her beautiful hair streamed over the pillow, her lovely head rested on one rounded arm, the other hanging over the side of the bed, a model of perfect symmetry and unconscious grace. It was her left arm, and in the soft light of the room he could see the glimmer of her

wedding-ring. He knelt beside the listless hand and reverently kissed it. Who knows what was passing through his mind as he knelt there? Who knows but that a prayer breathed with all the fervour of faith rose to lips unaccustomed to prayer, and stole away through the dark night, silently ascending to the realms where prayers are heard, to be granted or left unanswered?

He sat up late arranging his papers and accounts, and setting his affairs in order. He put away his books—lesson books, as Lucy called them—upon a shelf, and wondered when they would be taken down again, and whether he would ever now pass his examination.

At last he went to bed and slept, dreaming that he was returning from the war a Field Marshal, with a brilliant staff and a gay escort all shouting his praises. The people had all turned out to meet him, and among them he looked for Lucy, but for a long time in vain. At last he saw her standing aloof by herself. He rushed to meet her, but she turned and fled; he tried to follow, but tripped and fell heavily. He awoke to find his bearer pulling his big toe and telling him that the barber had come to shave him.

The day had begun—the last day of anxious inactivity and restless desire. Before it had closed he would be gone. He could scarcely believe it; Lucy could scarcely believe it; it was so very sudden and unexpected, she said; but how lucky he was to be chosen out of so many applicants!

It was a busy day, but amid all the hurry and bustle of preparation for her husband's departure, Lucy found time to scribble off a little note to Mr. Rook, saying

that though she might be late, she would certainly put in an appearance at his party that evening.

Jim meanwhile was making his final arrangements in the lines.

"I wish you luck," his Major said, shaking him warmly by the hand, "and we shall look forward to having you back with us again soon. You have learnt a great deal since I gave you that little piece of advice about expediency; but it's as good now as it was then. Remember expediency when you have forgotten everything else; and, by the way, it is not always expedient to tell one's wife *everything* one hears."

Jim understood this to mean that the worthy Major had quite forgiven him his unfortunate indiscretion, and trotted homewards happy on that account. On the way he met young Hicks, the happy possessor of many polo ponies and two racehorses.

"I say, Vraille," he shouted, "you're off to-night they tell me; is that so?"

Yes it was so.

"Look here, I'll give you my bay country-bred, Peter, and a thousand for Mustapha. You can't take a good horse up to that beastly country, where he'll have nothing to eat but thatch; if you do, you'll knock him to bits and lose a pot over him. Come, Peter and a thousand! Is it on? I can send him round at once—and the cheque," he added, persuasively.

"Much obliged for the offer," said Jim, "but Mustapha is not for sale;" and he trotted on.

"Not I, old boy," he said when he was out of ear-shot, leaning forward and patting his horse's neck; "you've carried me too often and too well. Never fear,

I would not part with you for twice as much and twenty Peters into the bargain! Peter, indeed—the fiddle-headed camel! I'm not the rich man by half that I was when I bought you, but rich enough to keep you, any way."

He had balanced his accounts the night before, and found that, by settling up in all directions, he had just enough in the place for personal expenses without troubling his agents, which he was anxious not to do. But bills, when settling-up day really comes, seem to breed and multiply; a sheaf of them awaited settlement on his writing-table and made a large difference in his balance. They were mostly for things he had never seen or heard of, but supposed were necessary for household purposes of which he was ignorant, and he paid them cheerfully enough; he wished only to get to the end of his business and have leisure to talk to Lucy. When all at last seemed settled, his bearer told him that the Schroff was in the verandah and wished to see the Sahib.

The Schroff was admitted.

It was a small matter, only two thousand five hundred rupees lent at odd times to her Highness the Mem-Sahib—see the notes of hand. The Schroff was a poor man, and grieved to trouble his Highness, but perhaps the Sahib would see fit to settle for her Highness before he went forth to fight the Afghan: the land was full of disease and his Highness might not return; in which case. . . .

Two thousand five hundred rupees! It was not the money—that was nothing in comparison—it was the want of confidence that for a moment made him hang his head before the cringing Schroff. If she had only

applied to him, how gladly would he have given her twice the amount rather than allow her to run into debt with such a man.

"Two thousand five hundred," he said, looking up; "oh, yes, I know all about that. Here's a cheque for five hundred and a 'chit' for a thousand. The other thousand I'll give you this evening if you'll call again, say in a couple of hours."

Mustapha was well known and required no veterinary certificate. A note was soon written, and the order soon given to take the horse round to Hicks Sahib's bungalow and bring back Peter. Jim had not time, he told himself, to go into the stable and pat his horse's neck; it was quite unnecessary to pat a horse's neck before selling him. He had done so that very morning when he had told him that they would go to the front together whatever happened; he could not go and tell him now that he was to be sold. The poor brute's eye would perhaps reproach him for breaking his word. No! he would watch him being led out of the compound instead.

"Why, Jim," cried Lucy, rushing into the room in a hurry, "there is Mustapha going off already; surely it's too soon."

"Mustapha is going for good, Lucy. I sold him—this morning." The hours were too precious to be wasted in useless explanation, so he said "this morning"

"Oh, I *am* sorry!" she exclaimed heartily; "he was such a beautiful horse!"

"Lucy," he said, approaching her and throwing his arm round her waist, "the Schroff says you owe him a

little money"—the colour left her cheek and her hand trembled—"I have paid him nearly all of it and have told him to come to me for the rest. Don't, Lucy dear, borrow money from natives; you have no idea of the amount of trouble it leads to. Come to me if you want anything."

"Yes," she said penitently; and he kissed her.

"And, while I am away, think of me as if I were here—here by your side as I am now. In spirit, Lucy, I shall always be with you, always thinking of you. There is nothing—nothing in the wide world I would not do for you if you will only trust me. Trust me as you would yourself; I am part of you; we are one, dear, however many miles may separate us."

He paused, and she fidgeted in her chair; he frightened her.

"I am afraid, Lucy," he began again, "that sometimes we have not quite understood one another; I am afraid that I have not been gentle to you, as a man—still more a husband—should always be to the woman he loves."

"Oh, don't talk like that," she broke in, beginning to cry—he had touched her true self, he thought, and a gleam of joy shot through his heart to see her tears—"don't talk like that, I can't bear it; you have always been good to me, indeed you have."

"No, my darling, I have not; I have not tried to enter into your daily interests and amusements as I should. I feel now that we have not made the most of our lives—our lives together, I mean. But don't think harshly of me for that while I am away. Don't look back except to forgive; look forward to my coming.

I have been brusque and rude at times ; I am impetuous and then morose ; forgive these things, and only try to remember that I love you with my whole, whole heart ! ”

He held her hand, and, as if to seal a sort of solemn promise between them, raised it to his lips and kissed it. “ Come,” he said, “ let us go and see our boy together.”

Hand in hand they crossed the room. At the door he turned, and, flinging his arms round her, kissed her passionately, and whispered in her ear, “ Remember, remember what we have been saying when I’m away.”

In the nursery Jim went through his accustomed performance of face-making, and the baby crowed. After a time Lucy was called away to see to a parcel—a dress—that had just come home, and he and Judith discussed the child’s health.

“ He’s such a jolly little chap,” said Jim.

“ Bless ’un, yes,” said Judith.

“ And it would be an awful pity if he got ill again.”

“ He won’t get ill, Lord love ’un ! ”

“ You’ll see to that ? ”

“ To be sure I will, sir ! ” said Judith, vehemently.

“ You’ll look after him, and never let him out of your sight, except, of course, when he is with his mother ? ”

“ Make your mind quite easy there, sir.”

“ And, Judith, you’ll not think of leaving us till I get back ? ” He tried his utmost to put the question unconcernedly, and even followed it up with a whistle for the baby’s edification ; but his voice trembled a little, and the whistle broke in the middle.

"I'll not leave you, sir—ever," she replied ; "least-ways till I'm told."

He sighed a sigh which seemed to be of relief, and in his usual brusque way thrust the child into her arms and strode out of the room.

Dinner that night was a silent, melancholy meal, and after dinner there was but little time for conversation.

The last trunk had been packed, the last order given, the last suggestion made ; the *tikka-gharri* was at the door, the last package had been put into it—the time of departure had come. The sky, which had been clear throughout the day, had clouded over and the rain was pouring down in torrents ; it was a miserable night. There was no excuse and no time for further delay. He must go.

A man on his way to the wars may march through crowded streets, with bands playing and colours flying, with the mob cheering, and handkerchiefs fluttering from balconies—a look of exultation on his face, pride and hope in his heart. A man may leave for the wars from the platform of a garrison railway-station, the sad strains of Auld Lang Syne ringing in his ears, and the last kiss of his wife lingering upon his lips for many an hour after he has lost sight of her waving hand ; a man may stand at a ship's side and watch England, Home, and all that is dear to him fading away into the distance. There are various ways of leaving for the wars, all more or less heroic. But to pass from the genial light of home into the pouring rain outside, and step into a common *tikka-gharri*, is more prosaic than heroic. Lucy was crying a little ; and in his last embrace, while

bidding her be brave, he held her to his heart as if he would never again release his hold. "I'll soon, soon be back, my darling, but don't let the little chap forget me!" Then with a wrench he tore himself free.

"The station!" she heard him shout defiantly; and the sound of the crunching wheels was soon lost in the distance.

"Put out the dress that came home for me to-day," was the order Judith received a little later.

"What! going out—to-night?"

"Yes, yes; it's a bore, but I must go, I suppose."

CHAPTER VIII.

WORK.

IN point of distance, Vraille's journey was a long one, in point of time much longer. For six-and-thirty hours the train whirled him westward, but then all rapidity and even certainty of movement ceased, and he experienced difficulties and delays innumerable.

He journeyed in jerks; now crawling at a snail's pace on a high road behind a pair of jaded animals called by courtesy horses, stopping at every rut in which a wheel could stick; now flying at break-neck speed along a broken track in a *tonga* mail-cart drawn by three hill ponies abreast, whose only paces were a shambling walk and a riotous gallop. An eighteen hours' journey in one of these tongas was a gymnastic exercise that gave him an ache in every bone of his body. Still, anything was better than delay; and it was exasperating to be detained for days at a time waiting his turn for a place in one or other of these vehicles, and then, at the last moment, to see it given to some one else whose business was more urgent than his own. On that busy road, where all were struggling for the same goal, he was but an unimportant individual, armed with no "pressing" or "special" orders, and his progress was proportionately slow.

But, like every one else, he got on somehow, shedding portmanteaux as he went, and consigning to Parsee care every vestige of surplus stock in hand. At last, after experiencing many of the minor fortunes and misfortunes of war, he reached the mysterious line of demarcation between British territory and foreign soil—the Frontier! Here the exigencies of the service required that he should remain. Thus far, and, for the present at any rate, no farther were the orders he received; and so, within actual sight of the promised land, he halted and, literally enough, pitched his tent.

The invisible though far from imaginary line which just then meant so much to military mankind, stretched across the arid country at his very feet; on the far side lay ambition, on the near side disappointment; on both work and heat in plenty. Here peace was supposed to end and war to begin, and just short of the distinctive limit Vraile soon found himself very hard at work.

From morning until night he worked. Idleness in such a place was impossible, quiet unknown, and a night's rest a luxury. Order was here thrown daily into confusion, and confusion reduced to order. It was incessant and almost overwhelming work, but he laboured on and hoped. Day after day the living stream from India poured through the rocky pass, but he was left behind as in a swirling eddy. Week after week thousands of marching feet crossed the threshold of hostility, while his seemed destined never to advance a step. He saw drafts formed into columns, and stores into convoys; he watched them depart one by one, and sent a sigh after each. For no glory attended all this

work—it was but the preparation for glory, and, although he performed his duties with a zeal and earnestness that invested all his labours with a sort of melancholy merit, his soul panted for movement—movement that would carry him beyond the limits of mere active *duty* into the confines of active *service*. Such is war! The humblest and least ambitious of us likes to feel that his labour means reward; and where medals, clasps, and *batta* are at stake, the invisible line that separates them from duty for duty's sake is a distinctive boundary that it is well to cross and leave as far behind as possible.

Vraille was no high-souled hero who despised the little tokens of success; on the contrary, he wanted them, and had come over a thousand miles to get them. No one seemed to take any notice of him, and so, losing patience at last, he laid his case before those in authority over him, and said he wished to get on. Any application he liked to put in, he was told, would be forwarded through the proper channel. And here a slight surprise was in store for him: the proper channel for those beyond the frontier serving in his capacity was Colonel Dare. Now Jim knew well enough that Colonel Dare was employed on the same service as himself, and in the same part of the country, but he had supposed that his old friend had long before pushed himself well to the front, and had thought it exceedingly unlikely they would ever meet. And, if they did meet, what then? It mattered little. The old grievance was now very old indeed, and the old sore had well-nigh healed. Still Jim felt that the Colonel was hardly the person he would have

chosen to apply to for any sort of favour, however indirectly; and under the circumstances he preferred to wait and see what fortune or luck had in store for him. Fortune had favoured him so far; he was on the very brink of his desire, and it only needed a touch of luck to send him over.

"I've got a pretty good grip on to my new work by now," he wrote to Lucy, "and as time goes on the strain of course decreases. Already a stream has begun to flow in the opposite direction; the sick are coming in every day, and the wounded, too, which shows that things are going briskly at the front—the real front, I mean. I am not likely to see much fighting myself, nor am I likely to fall ill, for the healthy season will soon be setting in. You need not be in the very least anxious about me."

Poor Jim! Anxious about him! Ah, well, many a better man than he never got near the front at all, and few had such a lovely wife to write to and conceal things from!

The healthy season, as he so cheerfully called it, was certainly approaching, but meanwhile disease was accelerating promotion and opening vacancies in all directions. His turn was bound to come, and it came at last. But it was not until the rigours of the Punjaub winter had fairly set in that he heard he was to move onward. With delight he read his orders, with alacrity he prepared to obey them, and with enthusiasm he wrote the good news to Lucy; but it was with a feeling of inward misgiving that he looked forward to serving under the command of Colonel Dare.

By short, but not easy stages, he proceeded on his

way, and soon got accustomed to a life of perpetual discomfort. What mattered discomfort to a man released from a Pandemonium of inglorious labour! He laughed to see the skin peeling off his face and his beard sprouting in unsightly tufts, and wondered what his wife would think of him if she could only see him: ah, how he wished he could see her every now and again! He had pined for movement, and now every day in the saddle was taking him nearer and nearer to the front. The three months' delay on the frontier had ruined all his hopes of serving in the first advance; but the war—although a number of engagements had been fought—was very far from over, and there was plenty of time and scope for action yet. From camp to fort, from fort to serai, his duties carried him. On the march, in camp, surprise was always to be anticipated. Weak parties on the road, small garrisons in the halting-places, were common objects of attack, not so much from purely hostile motives as for purposes of plunder; but even the wanton murder of defenceless men struck him with less horror than the sight of sane men going mad from over-anxiety and too much sun, as he had seen them do in the wretched place that, thank Heaven, he had now left far behind.

Spring was at hand, and the hearts of those that waited rejoiced. The snows upon the mountains were melting, the passes would soon be open, and hopes were high. Movements took place in the various columns, fresh dispositions were being made, and the road again became the scene of lively activity. Vraille watched the living panorama as it streamed along, and caught himself wondering whether everything in life worth

having (the mail had brought him no letter for some time) was destined to pass by him, while he stood helplessly on one side and watched. Around him stretched the dreary waste of sand and stone. Before him lay the road, laden with rotting carcasses that filled the air with stench. Along it passed the heterogeneous crowd—long strings of stately camels and herds of refractory bullocks, sowars and sepoy, growling ammunition waggons and creaking carts, Pathans, Sikhs, Half-castes, Baboos, Europeans. Here were all the elements of war, but where its sheen and glitter? The sun glared down upon the dusty scene throughout the day, then suddenly sank below the horizon, leaving the chills of evening to complete the process that produced fever wholesale.

But fortune, who had stood his friend so often, smiled upon him once again. News reached him that an officer at the Head-quarter Camp, as it was called, had been invalided, and he knew that in the ordinary course of events the vacant billet would soon be placed at his disposal. Was this luck, or was it not? Could he decline the post if it were offered him? Hardly. Time set his doubts at rest by bringing him "orders" to report himself forthwith to Colonel Dare. For six months in all he had been a wanderer on the road; for three of them he had suffered hardship and discomfort. His discomforts, he knew, would soon be at an end; but should he lose his liberty of action with them? The success or failure of his next move remained to be proved. Once again he struck his tent; once again he saddled Peter for the march.

The last stage was reached in time, and, on the

afternoon of a too glorious day, after a longer march than usual, Vraille saw in the distance the outlines of an Afghan fort, and dotted about on the surrounding plain a cluster of white specks sparkling in the sun's declining rays. Larger and larger grew the specks until they assumed the well-known proportions of the many-shaped tents of a large camp. Directed to the Head-quarter Mess, Jim sent in his name to Colonel Dare.

"Well, Vraille," said the pompous voice he remembered so well, "here you are at last; you've been taking your time, haven't you? But never mind that now; we can hear all about it to-morrow. You'll find a room in the fort to shake down in for the night, I dare say. Come to my office the first thing in the morning, and I'll set you to work."

"Very good, sir," said Jim; and away he went, reminded by the savoury odours that pervaded the Head-quarter Mess how desperately hungry he was, and wondering whether he would be able to get anything to eat and drink at the fort.

As he stood staring somewhat helplessly about him at its mud walls, he was accosted by a lackadaisical-looking young gentleman who was leaning out of an open window smoking a cigarette. "Looking for the mess?" he said; "here it is, come in and have a drink."

When Jim had explained his position and requirements, the lackadaisical young gentleman, who introduced himself as Dr. Doyle, supplied him in a trice with bread, butter, cold chicken, biscuits, cheese, proof rum, and other delicacies. "Half a dozen of us," he said, "attached to no particular regiment, have a scratch

mess of our own in here, and if you are going to be under old Dare you'd better join us."

In spite of his languid manner and drawling speech, Dr. Doyle—better known, Jim soon found out, as Dr. Dick—had not only a number of valuable suggestions to make for the new-comer's comfort, but did not mind exerting himself to put them into effect. He speedily arranged for a room in which Jim could pass the night, superintended the picketing of Peter, and offered the loan of everything he possessed. That night a pair of really clean blankets, a soft pillow, and a hospital dhoolie, formed the most comfortable bed that Jim had slept in for many a long day. "Well," he said to himself as he slipped into it, "the scratch mess may not be so important as the Head-quarter Mess, but it is a deuced sight more hospitable, any way."

In the morning he presented himself at the Colonel's office soon after daybreak, but was told by a fat baboo that the Colonel Sahib never put in an appearance until nine o'clock at earliest. So Jim employed the spare time in collecting his scattered baggage, pitching his tent, and seeing to Peter's creature comforts.

When the Colonel at last arrived, he was brimful of dignity and importance. The service on which they were engaged, he said, was of greater consequence than any in the field; for what was an army without mobility? What, thought Jim, would an army be without food, without help for the sick and wounded, without stores, without an experienced staff? However, knowing that all the world over "there is nothing like leather," and that *esprit-de-corps* was a noble sentiment, he did not argue the point.

"Of course," said Colonel Dare, "you are aware that I am the official representative of this particular service, and that a great number of officers besides yourself are accountable to me for the efficient performance of their duties; but, as for the present you are to work directly under me, I had better tell you personally how I wish things done, that we may understand one another. It is unfortunate that your predecessor was obliged to leave without formally handing over charge; but I will explain all that is necessary myself. You will open the letters and prepare answers (unless my special consideration is required) for my signature, and have everything ready for me when I come down in the morning. The lines and forage will be under your sole charge, the books and official documents will require your special attention, the payment of natives——" And so the Colonel went grandly on, detailing matters that had been at Vraille's fingers' ends for months past, and evincing a perfect knowledge of the duties incumbent on other people. The recital occupied some considerable time; and, as Jim said, "Yes, sir," and "Very good, sir," at intervals, he thought to himself that his new billet was not likely to prove a sinecure.

"You must understand," concluded the Colonel, "that administrative and executive details are your province, responsibility and general supervision mine. I am always to be found in the staff lines or at the Head-quarter Mess, in the event of any emergency. —Pretty comfortable now?" he asked, lighting a cigar. "That's right; soon settle on service—eh? I'll be down the same time to-morrow. Good morning;"

and away strode the gallant little chief, just as florid, though not quite so stout, as Jim had known him in England, but every whit as consequential as he had ever been.

True to his promise, Colonel Dare visited the office every day, and was never more than half an hour late. His ideas of general supervision were very general indeed. "They want a report upon so-and-so," he would say, or, "The Government has called for such and such a return," or, "Here is an urgent heliogram: I have left blanks for the figures, kindly fill them in and send on." Vraille wrote the report, compiled the return, constructed the heliogram, and took all the trouble; the Colonel affixed his signature and took all the credit. Still, Jim gained secret pleasure out of his work, and secret pride in the thought that he was fast becoming master of the situation. But while active service meant for him office-work, occasional inspection tours, and constant gallopings on Peter to and from the lines, the really active part of the army was advancing on before, like a will-o'-the-wisp that he would never catch. Battles were fought, marches made, forts taken, passes scaled, while on the lines of communication all was comparatively inactive and secure. Security and inaction led to the desire for amusement in default of anything better, and there was plenty going forward in the place—polo, gymkhanas, races, sports, concerts, cricket. Where, and under what circumstances, when two or three Englishmen are gathered together, is there not sport of some kind? And where—in the Desert of Sahara, on the Steppes of Siberia—would they not play cricket?

Vraille had little leisure, and perhaps not much inclination, to take any great part in these amusements, but he thoroughly enjoyed the good-fellowship of the Bohemian mess to which he belonged.

"Come down and have a look at the cricket," said Dr. Dick to him one afternoon; "there won't be much more of it now from what the thermométer says, and an outing would do you good."

"I've got some work I ought to do," said Jim, hesitatingly; "but perhaps I could let it stand over until to-morrow."

"To-morrow and to-morrow and to-morrow! of course it will stand over; take it with the rest that that old fool will pile upon you to-morrow. You'll never reach to-morrow, and you'll never reach the end of your work if you try to get through all old Dare tells you to do—every one but you knows that."

"Oh, I know it too!" laughed Jim, sighing all the same. "Well, all right, Dick, I'll go with you."

Richard Doyle, the youthful-looking doctor, and James Vraille, the old-looking captain, were a strangely-assorted pair. To all appearances there was nothing in common between them; but friendship, no less than love, is guided by no fixed law, unless it be the law of contraries, and is often cemented by seeming incongruities. Dr. Dick was distinguished for the symmetry of his figure, the elegance of his hands and feet, the beauty of his eyes and complexion, and the cleanliness of his attire under all circumstances. For some unknown reason (perhaps that his eyes reminded him of Lucy's—who knows?) Vraille had formed one of those strong attachments to which

he was addicted, and spent the greater part of his spare time in the company of this refined young gentleman. They discussed all sorts of questions together, and in these discussions the younger man listened with phlegmatic interest to the enthusiasm of the elder. What one saw to admire in the other no one could understand; but perhaps it was a pleasure to Vraille to open his mind unrestrainedly to an appreciative listener; and perhaps Dr. Dick had quicker perceptive faculties than most people, and recognised qualities in his white-haired companion which were hidden from the outside world. Be that as it may, some subtle sympathy existed between the two, and its influence tended to attract the elder to the younger man. It was in Doyle's tent that Vraille was more often to be found than Doyle in Vraille's, in the sultry evenings when the day's work was done.

"Why work like this?" said Dr. Dick on one of these occasions when Jim came in and flung himself wearily into a chair. "Why not let him do his own dirty work?"

"He's an old friend of mine," Jim replied, somewhat bitterly for him; "and, besides, he has plenty to do imparting instruction and giving gratis advice to every one he meets, without bothering his head about bullocks."

"He'll wear you to a thread," pursued the other, "as he did the unfortunate devil you succeeded, and never chuck you a thank, but take all the credit of your brains and work to himself."

Jim knew that this was true. He had worked, and

worked hard—there was not a camel in the place he could not account for; he had never received a word of thanks; and he only found that an intimate knowledge of his business brought pains as well as pleasures with it. It was pleasant to be sent for by persons in authority, and consulted when the Colonel's memory was at fault, but it was not altogether pleasant to find the whole work of the office gradually devolving on himself; it was, no doubt, gratifying to see his own opinions and ideas figuring in important correspondence, but hardly so gratifying to stand by and hear his chief referring to *my* letter, *my* remarks, *my* report, when not a word of any one of them had been written by himself except the signature at the bottom.

"And yet he talks incessantly of his responsibility," Jim said moodily, more in answer to his thoughts than his companion's last remark; "and, after all, he's only playing the same game that every one plays more or less; but unfortunately he shows his hand."

"If I took that melancholy view of mankind," drawled Dr. Dick, "I'd go and shoot myself."

"So would I," said Jim, stretching his long legs and running his fingers through the grizzly stubble that he used to call his hair when it had been long enough to part; "so would I. I'm talking rot as usual. It's no fault of his if he don't like me and my ways—he never did."

"Nor yours if you don't like him and his. He's an ass. But have you served under him before?"

"Yes, once—a long time ago now."

"At home, I suppose?"

"Yes, at home."

As Vraille seemed disinclined to volunteer any further information on this point, Dr. Dick, after a pause, continued—

“A garrison is a very different thing to a camp. Camp life is more like school life—it’s a great leveller of persons. Authority and discipline are maintained in both, but in both cant, selfishness, humbug, sentiment, are pretty sure to be roughly handled and knocked about——”

“Until they fall into their proper places,” continued Jim.

“Just so; and I believe the reason is that there are no petticoats to hide behind in camp.”

Jim winced.

“Sooner or later the man living under canvas, like the boy at school, is sure to come out in his true colours and show himself as he is. Look at you for example. I’ll bet that when you served under old Dare at home, no one imagined you would turn out to be the most patient military machine that ever walked in a pair of puttoo pantaloons.”

“’Pon my soul, you’re complimentary!” laughed Jim, thinking that Dick had driven a nail home.

“Take another example—old Dare. Now I expect he was a mighty big man in a garrison.”

“Took up the whole hearth-rug,” said Jim.

“Is the respect he commands in this camp proportionate to the dignity of his rank, do you suppose? or, better still, to his own conception of the importance of his position? Who, should you think now, was more often than not the subject of a good deal of the laughter that we hear at the Head-quarter Mess about dinners

time? Bless your simplicity, they've found him out up there, and written him down an ass long ago."

"Well, running the man down behind his back is not particularly fair, but I do wish he would look into things a little more. I'm not satisfied in my mind, do you know, Dick, that all is straight in that office, and I don't want to see him get into trouble, whether I like him or whether I don't."

"Why, what's the matter?"

"Nothing that I *know* of—that's the worst of it," said Jim, thoughtfully.

"Are you bothered, old chap? Can I help you?" There was sympathy and softness in his voice—there was even tenderness in the light of his honest blue eyes as he looked at Jim. Ah, how like they were to Lucy's, and yet how different!

"No, Dick, no—thanks—but it doesn't matter!"

"Don't worry about him; he's not worth it. Let him sweat it out, whatever it is, for himself; it will do him good. Let him rip. Take my advice and exercise your energy in your own interests. Bah, you'll never get on; you're far too earnest. As for old Dare, he has go enough of his own, surely, to carry him through anything."

"I wish it would carry him out of this," laughed Jim

"O-ho!" shouted Dr. Dick, whose humours were as changeable as sunshine in spring, and as prettily playful too—"o-ho! here's jovial James cracking jokes—and at his commanding officer's expense. Come along; let's take 'em up to the 'Head-quarter Mess, they'll be appreciated there."

It was proverbial that old Dare had a bad time of it among his peers—such secrets will leak out—but chaff

did his temper little good. The louder the laughter overnight, the worse time Jim had of it in the morning. At such times the little gentleman was portentously busy. Business with him meant fuss, and fuss meant heat, dust, and general unpleasantness all round, not to mention much valuable time wasted. He inquired into this, searched into that, scattering books and papers in all directions; asked for obsolete orders and quoted old regulations, dotted down instructions on slips of paper, counter-ordering them as he went along, and contradicting himself continually.

This sort of thing generally put him in a good temper, for after a time he would stop to talk about "a good day's work," "going thoroughly into things myself," and "waking you all up." But one morning, a day or two after Jim's talk with Dr. Dick, when the Colonel had thrown the office into greater confusion than usual, and was still unsatisfied with his day's work, he suddenly recollected an error in his accounts to which Vraille had called his attention the day before. Having cleared the office, he put on a confidential air, dipped his pen into the ink (for no manifest reason), and lowering his voice, said—

"And now, how about that mistake?"

"I have corrected it," said Vraille.

"Who made it?"

Jim named a half-caste clerk.

"Tell him, will you, that mistakes of this sort must not occur again? I won't have mistakes made."

"You recollect," said Jim, "that I have pointed out three or four of the same sort before."

"I know, I know," said the Colonel, testily. "Why

can't you manage to make things work smoothly? These little hitches give a great deal of trouble, and you must see for the future that they are avoided."

"But suppose," said Jim, looking the Colonel full in the face, "that they are made on purpose?"

"Made on purpose! What do you mean?"

"That from what I have heard and seen I believe that man is not honest."

"Not honest!" cried the Colonel; "why, he has been in this office ever since I've been here myself, and I never heard a word against him before; you must be very careful about what you are saying."

"I intend to be," said Jim, grimly; "at present I have confined myself to beliefs."

"But it is your business, sir," retorted the Colonel, warmly, "to report everything to me—*everything*, remember; I hold you responsible."

"Pardon me, Colonel, you told me when I came here that *you* took the responsibility."

"In a general sense, certainly; but in matters of detail of this sort——"

"All details, so far as I am concerned, are perfectly correct."

"And when you took over charge——"

"If you remember," Jim interrupted again, "I did not take over charge."

"But I myself told you——"

"What my duties were."

"Am I to be dictated to in my own office?" cried the Colonel, jumping up and looking angrily at his junior; "am I to be browbeaten and taught my duty by my subordinates?"

Vraille only smiled. His composure seemed to irritate the little man beyond all sense of dignity. "I will not be answered in this way, sir," he said, stuttering in his wrath; "I will not brook contradiction, let me tell you; and I'd have you remember the respect you owe me as your superior officer."

Vraille's lip just curled slightly, but he said nothing. Perhaps his old major's advice about "expediency" was standing him in good stead just then.

"You seem to insinuate that the work here before you came was not properly carried out?"

"I insinuate nothing," Vraille replied, rather hotly now; "I know nothing of what was done before I came. I thought it my duty to tell you what I have told you, and I believe what I say."

"Prove it," exclaimed the Colonel, "prove it! Don't come to me with ridiculous fancies, but bring proofs if you want me to listen to you."

"Very good, sir," said Jim, calmly; "I'll try."

Now Vraille's thorough knowledge of Hindustani had enabled him to understand a great deal of the tittle-tattle that he overheard daily among his natives. He gleaned from what they said that they were dissatisfied about some arrears of pay which many of them had been induced to leave in the office to accumulate instead of receiving when due. Again, that many beasts supposed to have been stolen were in reality given away as bribes or sold outright. These things, together with repeated errors in addition and subtraction, besides the graver mistakes which he had brought to the Colonel's notice, led him to suspect the honesty of the half-caste clerk.

After his stormy interview with Colonel Dare, he determined to put his suspicions to the test. Accordingly, that afternoon, he went down to the lines among the natives, and boldly put to them, without mentioning any names, a string of questions. The men seemed only too anxious to unburden their minds to any Sahib who would take an interest in their affairs; and Jim learnt many strange things, all of which he carefully jotted down in a note-book. That night, after mess, he went over to his office, and for a couple of hours studied the ledgers and account books of his predecessor, continually referring to his note-book, and taking careful memoranda of his discoveries. What they were he told no one—not even Dr. Dick.

Every day the Colonel asked him for his proofs; every day Jim answered that he was not ready with them; every evening he prosecuted his inquiries.

At last, when more than a week had been spent in this unpleasant way, the Colonel declared that he had stood the private detective condition of things long enough, and had demanded an audit of the accounts as a satisfaction to himself.

“Then, in Heaven’s name,” Jim blurted out, “arrest that clerk at once on suspicion, or you’re done!”

“What—what do you mean?” Until then Jim had always thought it impossible for the Colonel’s face ever to be pale.

“I mean that, as far as I’ve gone, that gentleman in there, whom you trust so much, has let you in for between two and three thousand rupees.”

“Good God!” exclaimed the poor Colonel; “I

haven't as much in the world—no, I don't mean that—I mean it's a lie, and I don't believe a word you say."

"Look here, sir," said Jim, drawing up his gaunt figure to its full height, "you're a bit put out, I know, and I can make excuses for you, but I won't be spoken to like that by any one. You will be good enough to withdraw that last remark of yours, or I must leave you to fight your own battles, and ask the General to decide whether I have lied or not!"

"No, no, Vraile, my dear fellow, of course I apologise; I spoke in haste—and no wonder; I did not mean that you were guilty of an untruth—of course not. But just explain the state of affairs to me, will you? Quietly, you know, quite quietly!"

The poor little Colonel was literally trembling with apprehension. Vraile produced his notes and memoranda, and at the end of half an hour had convinced his chief that what he had said was no less than the truth.

"Whatever shall we do?" asked the Colonel, looking up piteously at Vraile, his dignity fast deserting him.

Disregarding the *we* of this remark, the implication of which he seemed strongly tempted to question, Jim answered simply, "That, sir, is for you to decide."

"I'll telegraph to that man—what was his name? dear me, I forget for the moment—that man, I mean, who was here before you."

"He's dead, for one thing," said Vraile; "and secondly, so far as I can see, he has nothing whatever to do with it. Any falsified accounts I've come across are all certified as correct by *your* signature, not his."

"Dear, dear!" said the poor little man helplessly, "whatever shall I do?"

"Why, make a clean breast of it—arrest the man who made the entries, and report the case at once."

"But I have already demanded an audit; and, Vraille, to be candid, I said it was because I did not believe your statements."

"You did that!" exclaimed Jim. He made no attempt to conceal his disgust and annoyance, but checked the words of contempt that rose to his lips.

"You see I can't possibly tell the General yet. I do not even know the extent of my liabilities."

"Well, of course you must do as you like, but I believe you are making a mistake. Come! let me go and clap the rascal in the guard-room."

"Don't address me in that familiar fashion, Captain Vraille, although we are discussing confidential matters," said the Colonel, regaining some of his dignity. "I will give you my decision in the morning. In the meantime please make every investigation and endeavour to ascertain the sum-total of these defalcations."

In this way some men give thoughtless orders; and others are found foolish enough to obey them. To Vraille an order was an order, and he sat up far into the night poring over his books. It was close on daybreak when he laid them aside and went to bed.

"Well," asked the Colonel, turning up at office-hour fresh as a daisy, "what have you to report?"

"A deficit of four thousand five hundred," said Jim.

Colonel Dare gasped, and as he sank into his chair clutched the arms of it tightly. "Arrest him!" he said at last.

"When I can catch him, I will—he's bolted."

For the second time in their lives these two men confronted one another under trying circumstances. The tables were completely turned; and though Vraille had made no accusation, the Colonel now looked every inch of him the culprit. There was a silence of some seconds, and then in a broken voice he muttered, "I'm a ruined man."

"Not a bit of it, sir!" said Jim, encouragingly. "Pay the men up, and take the rest of the money with your report to the General. No one can say a word to you then. We are all liable to make mistakes."

True as all this was, it failed to raise the Colonel's spirits. "I said I was sure that everything was right," he faltered.

"Well, now you must say you were mistaken, that's all."

"Can you put the books right?"

"Oh, yes!" said Jim, cheerily.

"And we need not mention those men if we pay them up?"

"You *need* not, of course."

"Then it's only a matter of money—four thousand five hundred, you said? If I only had it, I could pull this wretched business through. But I haven't; I could not, if I did my utmost, manage more than three thousand—you said three thousand yesterday. I am a poor man, although I am a colonel. I say, Vraille, you couldn't, I suppose—you couldn't——" and there he stopped.

Jim faltered, and then, after a momentary inward

struggle, replied carelessly, "If you don't mind being my debtor for a time, Colonel, I shan't want my pay for a couple of months; I've plenty to go on with."

"Thank you, thank you!" said the Colonel, pulling himself together; "very generous of you to be sure; but we will make it a pure matter of business. I will give you security, of course, and interest, if you wish it."

But Vraille did not wish it.

"You will oblige me," the Colonel remarked, as he dried a cheque on his blotting-pad, "by not mentioning this little transaction to any one—will you?"

"You need not have asked me that," said Jim sitting down to draw up the Colonel's report.

What the result of that report was Vraille never knew. Three days afterwards news reached the camp that the body of a half-caste had been found on the road, murdered, and of course looted. The audit of the transport accounts passed off successfully, and a rumour spread that the money stolen by the runaway clerk had been generously made good by Colonel Dare.

Murders and robberies on the road were common enough, and the affair was soon forgotten. Dr. Dick at first plied Jim with questions; but finding that he would not answer them, confined himself to chaffing his friend occasionally about his reticence.

"No one but I seemed to think it strange," he said one day, "that a man should risk his life for a few hundred rupees; but every one was astonished that old Dare should have been clever enough to find out he was being swindled. Only the other day I heard

him saying how lucky it was he discovered the rascal's tricks before much damage was done. He did not mention your name at all. Now that was not kind of him, was it?"

"He is not exactly what one would call a *kind* man," laughed Jim; "but let's talk of something else."

"In a minute; but I just want to say that when a man like you is loyal to a man like Dare; when he refuses a friend's assistance because he has that man's secret to keep; when he goes out evening after evening and works half the night; and when he holds his tongue while every one else is talking, I strongly suspect him of having somehow saved that man's reputation; and a reputation is not lost for a few hundred rupees."

"He was perfectly straight," said Jim, hastily; "indeed he was!"

"You were straighter, or he'd have said something about you!" said Dr. Dick.

CHAPTER IX.

ACTION.

THEN came the heat—heat that filled the hospitals and sent men by hundreds back to India—heat that pierced through canvas as if it were tissue-paper—heat that increased with each succeeding week, until there was no appreciable difference of temperature between day and night, and the mercury hovered about the hundreds in the sun; there was no shade worthy of the name.

Now and then a skirmish, a raid, a murder in the dead of night, a road-side robbery, varied the long-drawn-out monotony; but, for the most part, life in those rainless plains was but a wearisome succession of tedious days, all blazing hot, all bringing with them disease and death in some shape or form.

Vraille had often changed his station, but always gravitated back to the Head-quarter Camp after an absence of a few weeks; perhaps the Colonel had learnt his value. A visit of inspection to a serai a couple of stages up the line was now over, and Jim and his chief were to return to the camp on the morrow.

He was writing to Lucy. "We hear of great things done," he said, "but we do not see them. Great things are not for me; I am, I fear, a man doomed to inactivity." (He did not add that inactivity was killing

more men than all the battles of the war—and the war, every one said, was practically over). “You should have married a luckier fellow, Lucy—one who now and then got a chance of doing, instead of one always talking of wishing to do. You remember, darling, years ago now, how I longed for a chance of distinction, in order, as I said, to wipe out the stain of a certain event which I need not name again. I have had my wish; it has been granted in the cynical way in which Fortune has always bestowed her favours on me. What is Fortune without Luck? For nearly half a year now I have been serving under the very man who first put that absurd ambition in my head, and who is now fast driving it all out again: indeed, it is dying, if not dead, of contradiction.” Here, again, he made no allusion to Colonel Dare’s official troubles. A woman could barely be expected to take interest in such things: and Lucy, he fancied, did not always (judging from her replies) read his letters through. So he was careful to refrain from digressions which he thought might weary her, and tried to confine himself as much as possible to facts. Sometimes he even attempted the flippant, amusing style; but such passages, when he read them over to himself, never seemed to him particularly funny. “That moonshee,” he said in one of these attempts, “was a smart fellow in his way, although you never liked him. He always told me I had more Hindustani to unlearn than to learn, and that my knowledge of the language was derived from the riff-raff of the bazaar rather than from the classics of the country. I can write it, speak it, understand it—all vulgarly it seems. They were hard up for an interpreter for a court-martial

the other day. I volunteered my services. Had I passed the necessary examination? No. So I attended the court in the character of private member, and interpreted for the interpreter, who was a Higher Standard man, and had been brought twenty miles to officiate. He got his fee, I his thanks." He had posted this anecdote long since, wondering what she would say about it. She had taken a short cut out of the difficulty and had said nothing.

Anxiously he looked for her letters: hurriedly he broke them open when they came: eagerly he read them through: and very often with an ungenerous feeling of keen disappointment he laid them down when read. Lucy was not a good correspondent; her letters were often ill expressed and sometimes misspelt. But that was nothing. It was that they were so short, so barren of home topics—and latterly so very few and far between.

For more than six weeks she had not written. He took her last letter from his writing-case to assure himself of the date. It bore no date but that of the post-mark on the envelope.—Yes; nearly seven weeks old. He glanced his eye over the letter, although he knew every word of it by heart:—"Time flies in this place, letter-writing is a positive difficulty You have no idea how I am enjoying myself You remember that dress that you said you did not like so much as my others; well, I had one made exactly like it and wore it the other night. It was greatly admired. The Viceroy admired it. The Viceroy danced with me twice Mrs. Lovejoy and Mrs. Palmira were both there we did not get home till three in the morning you never appreciated me properly, Jim, I know, but other people"

He put the letter back into its envelope with a sigh, and sitting down at his table wrote :—

“Send me just a word, Lucy—just a line every week to say you and the boy are well. Do not let six weeks pass again without my hearing from you. I am anxious. Are you ill, and is that the reason?....” His pen flew over the paper—scratch, scratch, scratch. He who writes from the heart writes quickly, and Jim wrote on and on from his very heart of hearts. He was home-sick, he said, and yearning for a sight of his wife and child. Sometimes at night he could see her face, and hear her voice, imploring him to come back to her. Was this all foolish fancy? Or could it be that some spiritual communion was granted to two souls far apart, so that in some mysterious way they were in reality but one? Could it be that hearts which had once learnt to beat in unison could never beat apart again, and that only discord made them ache? “I dare not say that I believe these things,” he wrote; “but often have I thought and hoped that there might be some great undiscovered law (shall I say) governing our spirits, as the laws of nature govern our coarser selves. We are too ignorant to know, too material to perceive its influences; but every now and then there comes a flash of sudden light to our dull faculties, and we think we see for a moment the glimmering of some universal but unknown truth.”

He dashed down these high-flown sentiments as they passed through his mind, and then caught himself wondering whether she would read them with a yawn. He put the thought away at once as unworthy, but descended all the same to humbler topics.

"Do not forget, Lucy dear, that you see the boy every day and all day, and so are apt to think the less of the changes that are taking place in him. Put yourself in my place, who have not seen him for nearly a year, and try to realise how you would wish to hear every detail. Fill pages with detail—you will not bore me. Can he walk yet? Can he talk? Do you ever tell him about me? You hardly ever mention him, and"

A shadow fell across the paper, and looking up, he saw the well-known figure of Colonel Dare.

"Writing home? That's right. Plenty to tell them this time, eh?"

"Nothing unusual," stammered Jim, feeling rather guilty.

"Why, haven't you heard the news, then? You're quite behind the times. I have just been discussing it with the political officer here, and we agree in thinking it the most important event of the campaign. Why, my dear Vraile, an expedition has been attacked and cut to pieces. Ayooob is master of the field, and it is rumoured that this defeat has had a very serious effect upon the country—generally unsettled, you see, and that sort of thing. But, dear me, I am surprised at your not having heard all this; it has been the talk of the place for the past two hours. I came to tell you, though, about to-morrow's journey. This news has decided me to push right through instead of stopping as I had arranged at H—— for the night."

"It's a good sixteen miles," said Vraile.

"We can do it morning and evening. You see, it is of the greatest importance that I should push on—the

General might wish to consult me in the matter. Make the necessary arrangements for escorts, and see that we start early." Then the Colonel expatiated on his news, and explained to Vraille how the calamity might have been avoided. When he had finished, Jim said :

"A small convoy is to leave H—— for the camp to-morrow; I had better signal down to have it kept till the afternoon; we can then go with it."

"Certainly, certainly; say you have my authority."

"Very good, sir."

Very good! He had been answering his own suggestions with "very good" until he was sick of the sound of the words. Very good! It was not very good. The disaster which the Colonel had described had taken place miles from where they were, and its only result, so far as they were concerned, would be an extension of the wretchedly monotonous existence they were leading. Oh, Jim was sick of the war and wanted peace!

It might have been imagination—probably was—but Vraille fancied he noticed a curious expression on the faces of the hill-men they passed upon the road. H—— was a small serai eight or nine miles distant from camp, and while they had rested there through the hottest part of the day, he had noticed that the natives were chattering over their hubble-bubbles more excitedly than was usual even with their garrulous class; their talk was of nothing but the defeat of the Sahibs. The villagers, too, he thought, were eyeing the convoy with cynical malevolence. But

these fancies—for of course they were only fancies—he kept to himself; and as Peter strode along with monotonous tramp, head down, shoulders swinging, soon turned his thoughts in other directions. Why had he received no letter for so long? Was she ill? But that could hardly be, for Judith would have sent her mistress's messages, and, besides, he often heard of Lucy through other people. What could be the meaning of her silence? The old doubts and fears that had once so harassed him had long since been dispelled under the influences of calm thought and cherished hope. She had been thoughtless, and perhaps foolish, sometimes; but these were but womanly failings, and had been forgiven long ago—and well-nigh forgotten in his day-dreams, in the recollection of her loveliness, in the prospect of soon seeing her again, in the firm resolve to live more for her in the bright future than he had done in the dull past. This thought had always been a reproach to him. But now a new anxiety had presented itself, and was increasing every day. Doubt, was it? Doubt that she really loved him? No! a thousand times no!—and yet his heart ached.

As he rode on, he watched a grey crow burying its beak into the side of a camel's carcass on the wayside—burying it deep into the poor beast's heart. He got closer and saw that the camel was not quite dead, but moving in the agonies of death. The crow, disturbed at its work by the approaching convoy, lifted its head, its beak dripping; then, lazily flapping its wings, rose heavily into the air, leaving its prey dead.

“Ugh! horrible; horrible brute!—pitiless, remorse-

less vampire!" And then he laughed. "The Romans looked on crows as omens," he muttered.

He was moody and pre-occupied, and as he had failed to listen with attention to Colonel Dare's remarks, that officer had ridden on in front. Between them straggled camels, bullocks, four or five wagons, and a handful of Pathans by way of escort, with a few Sowars. Six miles of weary road lay before them, and the afternoon was wearing on. Phew! it was no weather for marching; the air was stifling, the stillness of it phenomenal; and the fierce rays of the declining sun as they struck his neck and temples under his helmet seemed to be burning holes into his very brain. Tramp, tramp, tramp; five miles now, and then Doctor Dick, and a pleasant evening. Tramp, tramp; what beautiful eyes the boy had—like a woman's. But all the girlish bloom of his complexion had flown—it was the work—he had been very hard-worked, lately—tramp, tramp—his face was longer and much thinner, his large eyes larger—yes, much larger—he was beginning to look more like a man than a——

What was that? The boom of a distant gun! Impossible! And yet the same sound had electrified every man in the straggling line, and every man, as if with common consent, stood still. Hark! Another—and again another!

Colonel Dare came galloping back. "There's firing on ahead—I heard it distinctly—in the direction of the camp. There it is again!"

"I hear it, sir," said Vraile. The calmness of his voice grated on his senses; it was unnatural—a moment before his heart had seemed suddenly to stand

still, now it was beating hard against his ribs—it was not his own voice, but some other person's. To make sure, he repeated: "I hear it, sir." Yes, it was his own voice, but he had never heard it sound like that before.

"What shall we do?"

Jim, as he listened to the question, wondered whether his own face was pale like that—paler, probably, for it was not normally so florid as the Colonel's; and yet he heard the same slow distinctness in the voice that answered: "That, sir, is for you to decide." What made those same words come again just now?

"We—we had better turn back, perhaps; don't you think so?"

"Turn back—very good, sir."

Then, as he rode along the line giving the necessary instructions, the details of the situation flashed in quick succession across his mind, and he seemed to grasp and realise each with almost painful distinctness. Five or six miles on, not quite so many back; a good road, but firing, to the front; a bad road and reinforcements to the rear. Yes, a sensible order. A hanging cliff of rock and boulders to the left, a dry nullah and undulating country beyond to the right; a winding road bending round the cliff, and very little view—a nasty place rather to defend. If the convoy were indeed cut off, what chance of escape was there? How many men available for defence? Three or four Sowars, useless in such a position except on foot, and a dozen Pathans—possibly natives of the country. Some of these Pathans had been behaving badly lately,

and hanging parades had not been altogether unknown in certain districts. Another boom, and then another ! The faint, far-off rattle of musketry—very faint, but yet unmistakably distinguishable. Could the firing be heard in those villages a mile or so behind?—perhaps not ; but only perhaps, for the atmosphere was strangely still, and on days such as this the sound of the evening gun would travel eight miles or more. The villagers and hill-men on the road had looked aggressive. Altogether the position wore an ugly look, and the order to turn back was wise. But could the order be carried out, and the retreat on H—— effected in time ?

All was babble and confusion in the convoy ; from momentary and absolute rest it had started suddenly into excited movement. The natives chattered and gesticulated ; the sepoys, gathering together in a knot, murmured beneath their voices ; while the sowars alone sat grimly calm upon their horses. The camels gurgled angrily, resenting the sharp tugs given to their nose strings by their drivers, who in the excitement of the moment turned this way and that, heedless of the pain they were inflicting ; the bullocks, left to their own devices, were trying to toss their burdens over their heads, but, caught by the horns in the connecting bands of their double packs, could only circle round their grounded loads ; the cattle, jostled and pushed in the press, some struggling to reach the solitary clumps of grass that sprang every here and there out of the sand and stone ; others with lifted head and neck outstretched lowed mournfully ; and all the time the puffing dust rose up in clouds from

under the shuffling feet, and added disorder to disorder.

But high above the din there rang a loud clear voice—through the press there pushed a large, ungainly horse. “Turn the wagons round,” came the command in Hindustani; “put the cattle in between the wagons front and rear! Divide that escort—half of you to the front; come, double up—no time to waste in talking!” Squeezing his horse in here, urging him on there, using persuasion in one place, force in another, the rider, directing, helping, encouraging, threatening, himself saw to the completion of each order that he issued, and then rode back to make his report:

“All ready, sir, except one wagon; we cannot turn it where it is—the road is too narrow; but we can pass it—shall we leave it?”

“No, no, we must not leave anything behind, it would be looted—better try again.”

“Very good, sir.”

“Come, men, the Colonel Sahib has given his order; the Colonel Sahib means to be obeyed—and so do I, his Excellency’s humble servant.”

But the drivers cared nothing for the wagon, and in their sullen faces showed only too plainly their reluctance to obey the Sahib’s command.

“Come,” sang out the voice once more, but with a sterner tone in it this time, “his Excellency’s order must be obeyed”—and seizing a whip from a man standing near, he draws the lash of it slowly through his hand. The wagon begins to move; the work is hard; the wheels balance on the edge of the incline; the road is narrow, too narrow; the men spring aside,

and with a rush and heavy crash the wagon bounds down the bank and falls upon its side into the nullah.

"Look, Sahib! Look upon the mountain where they come! We shall die, we shall all die!"

On the hill-side, beyond the nullah, having sprung, as it seems, from the very ground, come men. How many? Impossible to count!—one here, two there, half a dozen yonder; perhaps in all some five-and-thirty, perhaps more. Moving singly from stone to stone, from bank to bank, from boulder to boulder, slowly and cautiously they creep on towards the road. The flutter of their loose white clothing, the glitter, every now and then, of a naked knife, betrays their movements, but not a sound do they make, not a shot do they fire. Here and there among the stones, now one man, now another, can be seen, but nothing more.

"See, sir, as I thought, we are to be attacked. Have you any orders?"

"Yes, yes, prepare for the attack—issue my orders, please."

"Block the road, front and rear with wagons?"

"Certainly, certainly."

"Divide the escort?"

"Yes."

"Collect the cattle in between?"

"Why in between?"

"Their bodies, if they're shot, will give some sort of cover."

"Oh, very well; do what you consider necessary, Vraille—say it is with my authority."

"I've done all that; anything else?"

"No, nothing that I know of. Look here, Vraille, there is something the matter with the cylinder of my revolver; can you put it right?"—his fingers are fidgeting with the weapon. It is snatched from his hand—a moment's pause, and it is handed back.

"There, sir, you will find it all right now; there was not much the matter. Have you plenty of cartridges? If not, I can give you some; we shall want them."

In the speaker's face there is a look of strange exultation; his eyes flash with the fire of a wild enthusiasm, although his voice is modulated and low; but about the corners of his mouth hovers a half-playful, half-cynical smile. He is not a handsome man, but at the moment a touch of something like inspiration seems to lend his features a certain heroic beauty.

"You would wish me," he said, "to take charge of the other end of the line while you remain here?"

"Certainly, certainly; I was just going to suggest some arrangement of that sort."

"And we shall not want our horses now?"

"No, of course not."

"I'll report anything unusual, if I can; I shall only be over there, where you see those two wagons. Good luck, sir," and he turned to go.

"Vraille, Vraille, one moment! Do you consider we are in danger?"

"Very great danger, sir;" and he is gone.

Pushing through the cowering crowd, he reached the other limit of the line, where he flung himself from his horse's back, and passing the reins over the animal's head, tied them to the shaft of a wagon.

Two wagons at right angles here blocked the road, one across it, leaving only a narrow exit near the cliff, the other parallel to its outer edge, a similar arrangement to that made in the place he had just left a hundred yards or so to the right. Between these points were huddled cattle, natives, camels, the latter crouching on their bellies, and lining the edge of the nullah-bank. Away over the maidan were galloping a score or more of beasts that had broken loose, and chasing them as many men—hill-men, lured from their original design by the hopes of easier loot.

“Reserve your fire and wait my orders,” said the European voice that spoke Hindustani so fluently. Vraille was standing behind the sepoy who lined the wagons, and as he spoke he hitched the cartridge-pouch on his belt a little further to the front and loosened his sword knot.

The fluttering garments of those beyond the nullah were approaching nearer and nearer, until the faces of their wearers could almost be distinguished. Hovering from cover to cover, closer and closer they came; still not a shot was fired, not a sound heard, save that made by the jostling cattle; even the terrified natives cowered behind the beasts in panic-stricken silence.

Nearer and nearer come the turbaned heads, showing every now and then above the stones; while behind them, far away on the horizon under the blood-red ball of the setting sun, is gathering a cloud, rising up out of the earth, up, up to the very sky, and onward towards the scene of the impending struggle. The air is absolutely still.

Then suddenly from behind a boulder rose the form

of a tall thin man, stripped to his skin. Above his head he flung his arms, holding in one hand a three-foot knife, in the other a short dagger. With the yell, "Allah! Allah!" he rushed forward to the nullah.

"Amuck! amuck!" murmured many a horror-stricken voice upon the road.

"Fire!" came the word of command, sharp and clear—but there was no responding rattle. The man who gave the command opened the breech-lock of his revolver, looked down, and shut it again with a snap. Click, click—he raised the hammer. Then from beyond the nullah came the first sharp crack, and a sepoy fell forward upon his face.

"Allah! Allah!" The naked man has reached the nullah.

"Fire!" came the command a second time.

"Sahib, Sahib, he is a sacred man——" The muzzle of a revolver is thrust into the speaker's face.

"Order the men to fire, or by the god of your faith I blow your brains out! The Sahib has said it." A rattling peel, and the fanatic falls dead.

"Hah!" A subdued murmur of relief ran through the crowd of anxious watchers, and again they buried their heads behind the bodies of the crouching camels.

A momentary pause ensued, as if the heart of every man who saw that volley had suddenly stood still. The smoke hung over the nullah in curling wreaths, slowly ascending and dispersing. Frightened at the noise, the cattle began to push restlessly one against the other, opening gaps in their huddled ranks. Many of them then rushed down the bank to the front, and galloped madly down the nullah, again pursued

by hill-men. Then from above the boulders rose bearded faces, and glittering in front of them the long barrels of twenty or thirty bandooks; then puffs of smoke and sharp reports. Now the camels could no longer be restrained, but rising to their feet, pushed and jostled one another in their fright; some falling heavily to the ground again, others rushing down the nullah-bank.

Revolver in hand, a tall man walked along the line it was James Vraile. Six times he fired as he went, then, reloading as he turned, six times more as he came back. Eight of the most restless beasts struggled no longer; and the natives in the road, crawling on their hands and knees through blood and dust, crept under the quivering carcasses for shelter.

Another volley from the front, followed by straggling shots: to right and left the rifles of the Pathans now answer: men drop on either side; the stillness of the air is rent with groans and shrieks: the attack still presses on through the heavy-hanging smoke.

But out beyond the fight rises a dense and dusky veil, up, up above the setting sun, and bringing twilight rapidly. Higher and higher it surges, closer and closer it rolls; the sultry air begins to tremble, and circling pillars of ascending dust stalk like wandering ghosts across the plain.

The firing of the bandooks ceased; the rifles rattled on. Then through the din was heard the clattering noise of stones rolling one upon another, and here and there, through breaks in the curling smoke, could be seen the flashing of naked knives brandished in the nullah-bed.

“Now for the thick of it! Fire one more volley! Ha! There go four of them! Trust to your bayonets—they are of good steel. . . . It is Kismet! Glory!—or the happy hunting grounds—it is the Great God’s decree!” and leaping upon the wagon in front of him, he fires his revolver right and left, till it is empty; then draws his sword and holds it high above his head.

But surely all is lost, for the crowd presses in from the right behind a line of sepoy firing quickly as they come. They are being driven in. The flank is turned; the wagons at that end are lost; Afghans clamber over them, and with shrieks of hellish delight hack down all who obstruct their path. A rush is made for the narrow exit on the other flank, and it is soon choked with the struggling bodies of the natives. On the left of the retreating sepoy one figure fighting for dear life stumbles as it retreats—falls—and with the rattle of displaced earth and stones, slides out of sight into the nullah.

“The Colonel Sahib has fallen! Come, two of you, follow me!” None follow him. Alone he springs into the nullah, and, reaching the fallen wagon, stands astride upon it, guarding the helpless man behind him. His head bare, his revolver dangling useless at his side, his sword gleaming as he strikes, the man upon the wagon, streaming with sweat and bespattered with blood, fights like a maniac. “Ha! another down—one more! There! To hell with you!”

Then all is sudden darkness.

The dust-storm has obliterated the scene. The veil of blackness with bellying front, borne on by the

rushing wind, has enveloped man and beast, road and nullah, friend and foe. All are as one—as nothing. Like a wild sea rushing in upon the shore, the billows of dust surge upwards and roll on, and the tearing wind lashes all it meets and strikes it to the earth. Without lull or pause the tempest rages—and will rage for an hour or more.

When Vraille collected his scattered senses he found himself lying on his back looking up at a clear star-light night. All was still.

It was pleasant lying there, looking up at the calm heaven above him, and he felt strangely stiff and weary and disinclined to move; so weary that he closed his eyes again and tried to sleep. But his pillow was uncomfortable, and putting up his hand, he found it was a stone. Then he tried to raise himself upon his other arm, but found he could not; so he let his head fall upon the stone again and tried to think. As the glimmering rays of recollection slowly began to light up his dull memory, he heard a groan, and stretching out his hand in the direction of the sound, he felt the arm of some one lying close beside him. "Who's that?" asked a voice whose well-known tones at once brought back the past.

"It's I, Colonel—Vraille!" He could scarcely speak the words, his tongue felt like a strip of leather.

"Oh, I'm in such pain; I've been suffering agonies for hours and hours, and thinking of death. Oh, for a little water—if I only had one drop of water I think I should live. I thought I was alone; I could not move. Get water—ever such a little."

Overcoming his feeling of lethargy with an effort, Vraille struggled into a sitting position and looked at the figure beside him. It was not a pleasant sight. The poor Colonel lay upon his side huddled up under the wheels of the wagon; his face and clothes were smothered in dirt and dust, and the upper part of one leg was saturated with blood.

"You are wounded," said Vraille; "here, wait a bit, don't move; I'll see what I can do."

"Get me something to drink—there's a flask in my holster if you can find it—it was full of brandy and water when we left; be quick—bring it here." With difficulty the Colonel gasped out the words, and Vraille, as he rose to his feet and tried to moisten his lips with his tongue, understood his difficulty.

There was no moon, but the stars twinkled brightly. Vraille, stumbling as he went, made his way to the nullah bank, and, with what light there was, tried to find an easy place of ascent. The bank was not steep, but his left arm seemed benumbed, and with the use of only one he doubted his climbing powers. Not a sound could be heard but the rattling of the stones his feet displaced as he clambered up the bank, making slow and painful progress. When he reached the top he found the road strewn with the bodies of beasts and men. He looked into the faces of the latter to see if he could render assistance; but the eyes that met his were all glazed and staring, and as he stumbled on he heard not a single sound. The contents of the wagons had been thrown out upon the ground; but anything of the least value they had contained had been carried off by the plunderers. Not a rifle, a sabre, a saddle, a living

animal, could be seen: the convoy had been looted most effectually. "This," he thought to himself, as he stumbled on, "is the reason of the stillness; and to the fact of lying down there out of sight in the nullah while the pillage was going on we owe our lives, I suppose; and yet some of those sepoy must have escaped through the storm."

He found the Colonel's pony, dead and stripped of saddle and bridle; but after a little search round about he saw a wicker flask half buried in the dust. He snatched it up and began to unscrew the top, but securing it again very quickly, he thrust it into his pocket. "Not quite so bad as that yet," he muttered, and, retracing his steps, made for the other end of the line. Here he failed to find any sign of Peter, dead or alive; but he pounced upon a bagful of biscuits lying under a wagon, and put one of them in his mouth. He munched and munched, but could not swallow so much as a crumb, and so, hungry as he was, spat the biscuit out again. Putting half a dozen of them in his pocket, he made the best of his way back to Colonel Dare.

"It's all right, Colonel," he said; "here's the flask—here, take it and drink."

But the Colonel did not answer, and Vraille, peering anxiously into his face, saw that he could not answer. He unscrewed the top of the flask and thrust the neck between the fainting man's teeth. They closed upon it, and the parched lips sucked in the liquid, drop by drop at first, then gulp by gulp, until it was all gone. Once Vraille made a slight motion as if to draw the flask away, but instantly the other's hands closed upon it, and held it to his mouth until it was empty. Then

he released his hold, and Jim sighed; the wounded man was not accountable for his actions, that was certain.

Ah," said the Colonel, drawing a long breath, "that has put new life into me."

"Come then," said Vraille, shortly, "we must be going; get to the camp by morning we must somehow."

"I doubt if I can walk, Vraille; what shall we do if I can't walk?" For the first time he tried to move. "Oh!" he cried in pain, "I can't; I knew I could not."

"You must," said Jim.

"You won't leave me, will you?"

"No, I won't leave you; but I must take you with me somehow, if I have to carry you on my back."

Jim meanwhile set to work feeling all the Colonel's bones, regardless of his groans and exhortations to be careful. "Look here," he said at last, "you are not so bad as you think; you'll get along right enough when I have tied your leg up; just lie quiet till I've found a bit of linen or something." He groped about among the stones, and close by picked up his helmet. "Ah, happy thought," he muttered; and ripping off the pugree, bound it tightly round the Colonel's wounded limb. "Now," he said rather sharply, "get up." Colonel Dare, with his assistance, struggled to his feet, and held on to the wagon for support. "Oh, my head, my head!" he groaned. "Oh, the ground is trembling and rocking, and everything is swimming round and round."

"Here, eat a biscuit, if you can; it'll do you good."

While the Colonel was munching the biscuit, Jim

searched about again among the stones. "It ought to be somewhere close," he muttered; "I know I had it, but I can't remember how I lost it."

"What are you looking for, Vraille?"

"My sword; you haven't seen it, have you?"

"Oh, never mind your sword; for Heaven's sake let's get on, I feel steadier now."

"But I do mind it. I have lost my revolver, that's bad enough, but we haven't got a cartridge between us, so yours is no good, and I'm not going to take you five or six miles like that without a weapon of some sort." Thus speaking, or rather hoarsely gasping out the words, he continued his search, and at last, lying close under the wagon, found what he sought. He picked it up by the blade in his hurry; his fingers stuck to it; with a shudder he pushed it home into the scabbard. "That is a horrible sensation," he said to himself, and then aloud—

"Now, Colonel, come along; how do you feel?"

"Better, better; but I shall never reach the camp alive—never!" I know it, I know it. And, Vraille, I have some things I want to tell you while they're on my mind; there's that four hundred I still owe you."

"Oh, come, sir, come, this is no time to talk about that. What do you suppose I care about four million now? I've never given the thing a thought from that day to this; indeed I haven't. There, make your mind easy, and just think about the camp. Come along!"

Without more ado, he passed his sound arm round the Colonel's waist, and half-pushed, half-dragged him down the nullah.

"I cannot do it—I cannot walk on these stones;

hadn't we better take the road?" said the Colonel between his groans.

"Not just yet, any way," said Jim, grimly; "your nerves would not stand it."

"Is it a horrible sight?"

Vraille did not answer.

"Tell me, is it a horrible sight? Is it like a battle-field, do you think? You saw it, I suppose, when you went up; but you couldn't see the wagon from the road—no, you couldn't see that. It was too dark, wasn't it?—of course, much too dark. But I've got some things I want to tell you."

"Look here, Colonel," said Jim, halting for a moment, "try and understand what I am saying. Our safety depends on our walking. If we talk we shall be overheard, perhaps, and then we may never reach the camp. Now, don't talk, Colonel, only walk—walk on and on, you know."

"All right, Vraille, I'll try and do what you say."

With this understanding between them, they crawled along for nearly an hour without speaking, often stumbling, sometimes falling. At last the Colonel could stand it no longer. "Vraille," he said, "I must rest—I must indeed, just for a minute."

"Very well, sit on that stone; I think we're pretty safe now, we're a mile and a half from the wreck, if they take it into their heads to come back."

"What I wanted to say was this, Vraille, and I *will* speak. If I get out of this alive, your money is safe."

"Tush!"

"If not, I have left a record of the debt among my papers. But, oh, I shall be safe in an hour or two,

though I did not think it while I was lying under that wagon. You see, Vraille, I am a very poor man—very poor indeed, that's the truth—and if anything should happen to me I do not know what would become of my daughter Edith. She would be left without a penny in the world. That is what made me so anxious. You quite understand that, don't you?"

"I understand what it is to have a wife and child that I want to see again."

"But I have no wife now, that makes it so much worse for me; you cannot understand that—no, no, of course not—but as you are the only person I have left to speak to, I implore you, should anything—not that it will, of course not—but—to do anything for her you can, help her in any way, should she want help."

"Yes, yes, of course, Colonel; but come along, another couple of hours and you'll be safe, and then you can go back to her hale and hearty, and look after her yourself. Come, pull yourself together, and let's jog on." He spoke kindly; for the first time in their acquaintance the old gentleman seemed to be showing thought and consideration for another, and though it was only now in his light-headedness, it was nevertheless a sign of the existence of kindly feeling latent somewhere in the selfishness of his saner moments.

"Just one moment more, and then I'll come."

Spite of his fleeting wits, he made a great effort to pull himself together and regain some semblance of his old dignity. "Some years ago, Vraille, when you were serving under my command, I saved you, you know, by a sharp——"

"Come along, let's go on now."

"I might have pressed the charge, you know——"

"Am I to listen to this babble and say nothing? Come, Colonel, come, or I must leave you here."

This, then, was why Dare had never mentioned the court-martial to him from the day it had taken place until now! The man was babbling, and fast going off his head; but still, in his wanderings, he was blurting out what evidently was upon his mind, and what, no doubt, he conceived to be the truth. As poor Jim stumbled slowly on, holding up the feeble frame of his companion and listening to his unintelligible murmurs, he thought of his child and his wife, of justice and injustice.

For two weary hours the pair dragged their heavy steps over the sand and stones, now striking the road and making better progress, now stumbling along the bed of a nullah, or, in places where the road offered likelihood of ambush, walking parallel to it across country. Often they had to stop and rest, for the weight of the Colonel's body grew heavier and heavier on Jim's arm; once, where a filthy stream trickled by the road-side, Vraille lay upon his stomach and drank—drank until he could drink no more, and would have drunk had there been poison in every drop.

Away in the east a faint light betokened the coming of another day, and, straining his eyes to the utmost in the direction of the camp, Jim tried in vain to make out through the mists of the falling dew the outlines of the tents.

"Come, Colonel," he said wearily, "only a mile or so more, and an easy road; come, one struggle more, and we are safe." He passed his arm round the

Colonel's waist once more and tried to force him on to his feet from off the stone on which he was sitting. But the man's energy was spent ; he had made his final effort. With a sigh he sank into a heap upon the ground.

"Safe!" he said. "Yes, we are safe, and after years and years of wandering—long weary years. He sprang upon the wagon, I tell you! I saw him do it. One, two, three—I think it was three, but I cannot be quite sure. But the service we are engaged upon is important—more important than you think. Oh, yes, you may laugh, but I assure you I have my authority. There it is again! Did you hear it? Turn back, I say; turn back while there is yet time! He saved my life; but for him, Edith, only the workhouse; but that is too absurd—not a penny in the wide, wide world. Why, I have known the Victoria Cross given for less, indeed I have. There was a man once——"

The tints upon the horizon deepened, and the heavens blushed with a rosy red. Phantoms of the night skimmed across the maidan to their hiding-places; skulking jackals howled and hurried on; night-jars cackled out their last few notes, while bats flapped homewards, and vultures swooped and screamed through the heavy air. Shafts of light, shot from the east, tipped the stones with gold, and, little by little, the road opened up through the mists, and showed a long straight line. Straining eyes and ears, Vraille stood in front of the senseless man, looking down at it. What was it? Another party of murdering thieves? Was he to draw that bloody sword again and fight once more, only one against ten—twenty? No! Thank God! help at last!

“Poor old chap! What a sight! There, hold up, Jim, dear old fellow, rest your head against my knee. Now take a little of this.” It was a soft, sweet voice, full, overflowing with womanly tenderness. “Better for that, aren’t you? Come, a little more—so. That’s right. Now lean on me; put your arm—the other one, old chap—round my neck. We’ve got a dhoolie for you here. We came to bring home your dead body, so cheer up—you’re not dead yet by a long way.”

“Ah, Dick, it was a near thing.”

“We know all about it; some sepoy came in an hour or two ago and told us. We had a bit of a brush ourselves, you know, but the storm blew ’em away like flies.”

“How’s old Dare?”

“Don’t you bother your head about him any more. He’s right enough, and if he only talks to-morrow as he is talking now, it means the V.C. for you, my brave old pal.”

CHAPTER X.

PINES AND RHODODENDRONS.

SIMLA society sparkled with stars that season ; and among so many shining lights, where none were small, it was something to be a planet of the first magnitude. Ah, Lucy Vraile outshone them all, talk as they might, smile and ogle as they might, dress as they might ! Little Mrs. Lovejoy, who at seventeen had married the General when he was—well, some said seventy, but people in India, especially unemployed generals, are apt to look older than they are, and very likely he was not more than sixty-five—little Mrs. Lovejoy was gay and pretty and pleasant to talk to because of her never-failing light-heartedness ; and Mrs. Palmira, that clever consort of the astute Deputy Commissioner, was, no doubt, excellent company ; but Mrs. Vraile, the wife of old Jim Vraile up at the front in the Transport or something, was the woman to know. Hers was the jampan to walk beside, the villa to which to be asked to tiffin or supper, the ball programme to be written in ! At her shrine the worshippers crowded, in her bright light they fluttered, and sometimes singed their wings. And grass widows were innumerable that season, male *Lepidoptera*—butterflies and moths—somewhat scarce, so that Mrs. Vraile's pre-eminence was all the more a matter for self-congratulation. Fair ladies, who wished to flirt or dance, could not discriminate

too daintily or philander too long with their favours—she who hesitated stood out. But Lucy, among the very few, was not one of those troubled with the common anxieties and doubts that harassed the weaker of her weaker sex. She was above emulation and beyond competition. She could pick and choose as she pleased without detriment to her enjoyment. And she did pick and choose—as often as her fancy prompted her; and she did enjoy herself—immensely.

“Oh, she is first, the rest nowhere!” the favourite of the hour would exclaim.

“Undoubtedly she takes the apple,” the last favourite but one would mournfully admit, “and there’s more of the Venus than the Psyche about her, after all.”

While the war was at its height, and during the early part of the summer, it had been a comparatively simple matter to gain an ephemeral reputation as the Beauty’s latest choice—to snatch a waltz here, a ride there; to hold her hand, her waist, or her pony, as the case might be, through shorter or longer periods of transient beatitude; to bask for an hour, a day, a week even, in the sunshine of her approving smiles. But when, a little later on, the place began to fill, these happy chances came so seldom that they were scarcely worth the physical trouble and mental anxiety of waiting for. Still men did wait, and did hope, until Herbert Rook entered the lists, when they waited on, but hoped not. It was of little use attempting to compete with such a man;—his reputation was too well established, his honours too thick upon him; his advantages, bygone, present, and to come, in the struggle for supremacy too potent to make head against. He had ridden into

Simla with victory written on his smiling face. It was a foregone conclusion, and none knew it better than he. In a week he was master of the field.

Ah, Simla was the blissful centre of the great Indian circle of enjoyment ; it was the vortex of the whirl of gaiety ; it was the nucleus of all that was entrancingly charming. Never in all her life had Lucy been so thoroughly happy ; not a day came that did not bring with it some new pleasure, some fresh delight, some additional triumph to record upon her long scroll of conquests. Life in Simla was life indeed ; all other existences were but vegetation. And then, when the cup of her enjoyment seemed full even to the brim, Herbert Rook—the man universally admired and made much of, whose individual attention any woman of her acquaintance would have given five years of life to call her own, as she, Lucy, could—the man who had pitted her beauty against that of the women of all Asia, had come to sweeten the nectar in her cup and cause it to overflow with the very excess of pride and pleasure. What he said she knew to be true. There was not a face, a figure, a wardrobe in the Himalayas to compare to her face, her figure, her wardrobe. Could she not, if she chose, fill her programme three times over for every ball before that programme was even printed ? Did not men ask her to dance by the score, and could she not refuse them by the score ? Did not women frown at her, and could she not afford to smile ? Her success she felt to be complete, the zenith of her glory attained, the top of her ambition fulfilled. She was queen of the season, with Bertie Rook chief courtier.

But holding court entailed expenditure of money,

and Jim was becoming a regular "screw." He never sent her a cheque now without an accompanying moral lecture, and sometimes went so far as to divide her just demands by two, saying that she must try and clothe herself out of her own purse. It was not fair; he had married her under false pretences, and, indeed, had owned as much himself.

She was in straits, and consulted Mrs. Palmira, who had stood her friend before. Mrs. Palmira's opinion was that a generous husband's knowledge of domestic economy should of course be confined to addition and multiplication; her advice was contained in the one word "owe."

"But I must borrow before I can owe," protested Lucy, her beautiful eyes wide open with interest and sagacity.

"That, my dear, is the wisest remark you ever made in your life, I suspect," was Mrs. Palmira's reply, and Lucy felt quite pleased. Scores of men had told her she was witty and talented and clever and "so satirical," and many other nice things, but no one had ever called her wise before. Jim, she had sometimes fancied, thought her foolish, but she was not so foolish, after all her experience, as to expect appreciation from a husband. Jim's opinion was not worth a button, whereas Mrs. Palmira's—every one respected that.

"Yes," she said, "I'm not a perfect fool, you know. I'm not, as your friend Mr. Hicks would say, in leading-strings by long chalks. I know a thing or two, and one of them is, that I can't owe any more without borrowing."

"What on earth do you want money for?"

"Oh, come," ejaculated Lucy in surprise, "you of all people to ask such a silly question!"

"I really can't see, all the same; you have a house to live in, horses to ride, food to eat, servants to wait upon you—all paid for, and what else you want, I really can't conceive. Money won't buy wisdom, you know."

"Of course it won't; and who wants it? How absurd you are! But, seriously, there are some bills I really must pay before I can order anything more—even Pelliti has refused to send me in some things I wanted for another little supper, and I've been obliged to put it off."

"Terrible!" said Mrs. Palmira.

"Yes, isn't it? Now, really, what would you do if you were me? Do help me with your advice; you helped me once before, you remember."

"Yes, I do remember. I am not likely to forget, with young Hicks dancing attendance on me all day long. That horse of his keeps me in perpetual remembrance—I wish it didn't; every race Mustapha wins jogs my memory most unpleasantly. No, my dear, I am afraid I cannot help you any more. I *have* a conscience, though people do not generally think so."

So Lucy, for the first time for many a long month, went about among the pines and rhododendrons looking dejected and unhappy. What was she to do? Gradually get dowdy, and wear old gowns? Cease to entertain her friends, and fall in every one's estimation? Cede the first place to Mrs. Lovejoy? Perhaps fail to win fresh applause from Bertie Rook! Mrs. Palmira had deserted her in her hour of need, and she would not confide in Mrs. Lovejoy; for Mrs. Lovejoy, she knew, would not help her, and objectless confidences with heartless women were not at all to her taste.

There was no help for it, she must apply once more to Jim. She did apply, and in course of time received the equivalent of a ten-pound note. Ten pounds! It was little better than useless. But she would not have felt so hurt if he had sent the sum, paltry as it was, without remarks; it was the accompanying letter that was so galling.

"It is not, my darling," he wrote, "that I grudge you the money; but I really have not so much to spare as I had. Indeed I have not; I wish I had, and you should have it all—all. But, dear, your request came at a most unfortunate time. I have been obliged—I could not help myself—to lend a fellow here a couple of months' pay; that means a little less than a thousand rupees, and consequently I am rather short. But I will send——"

This was the sting of it. What right had he to be spending money to "fellows" when his wife was in want? and a thousand rupees would have helped her over the worst time comfortably, and enabled her to carry on the war; and the thousand rupees that by rights belonged to her were given to a "fellow." She would show him that her pride was wounded by not writing to him again until he apologised. Each letter she received she tore open to see if it contained a cheque, and if it did not, flung it into the drawer that was already chock-full of his effusions.

Deprived of all sorts of minor comforts, she struggled on, wearing the same dejected air, until at last Bertie asked her the cause of her distress.

"What is it ails my bright Lucy?" he said; "why is she no longer gay? What is it, *Mater Dolorosa*?"

"Oh, nothing, nothing; I am a little worried, that's all!"

What a pretty name—*Mater Dolorosa*! He always had some pretty new name to call her by every time they met.

"Come, Lucy, surely we are too old friends to be afraid of trusting one another with our little secrets" (Lucy's little secret was a common topic of tea-table talk, by the way); "and if you do not tell me yours, I shall only think it is something you would rather *I* did not know, and then the charm of our intimacy would be gone."

"It is not about you; nothing to do with you, except——" The thought of Pelliti and the indefinitely postponed supper-party prompted the word; but she stopped in time.

"Except? Ah, why will you not trust me? Have *I* ever attempted to deceive *you*?"

"No, no, no!" protested Lucy, earnestly.

A ghost of a smile flitted across his handsome face, but she did not notice it, and he went on—

"Then why will you not confide in me? Do you doubt that if you were in trouble I would try to comfort you? or if you were in any little difficulty, let us suppose, that I would do my utmost to help you? I might not prove altogether powerless, you know. Surely, Lucy, you know me too well to doubt me."

"Yes, yes; it's not that, but——"

"And surely you feel some of the sympathy I have for you; some of the great——" A sigh smothered the word.

"I know—I know, Bertie; but it's hardly——"

"There is one thing," he interrupted gently, passing his arm over the back of her chair and inclining his head towards her that his words might be all the more low and impressive,—“there is one thing you may not know, and that is the secret desire that is always upon me to render you some trifling service in return for all your kindness and hospitality to me. You never give me a chance”—he asked her to luncheons and picnic parties by the score, and she always accepted such invitations—“you are too good—too generous ever to suppose that you have put me under obligations, and too single-minded ever to think that I might wish for a happy chance of repaying some of them, however inadequately.”

Then he dilated upon her charms and personal attractions, until, little by little, as surely as the cork-screw draws the cork, he extracted the secret that he already possessed.

“Is that all?” he laughed, when Lucy’s story had been unfolded. “Is that all?”—and he laughed again—a subdued, melodious laugh. “Why, Lucy, dear, what a sweet little simpleton you are! There is nothing in that. Why did you not tell me long ago, instead of pining over such a trifle?”

“If he hadn’t been so mean,” said Lucy, “of course I should not have been obliged to tell you, even now.”

“Of course not; but as he has done me a service, trouble no more, *ma mie*.”

This was a friend indeed! She had never felt the same towards any man in her life of the hundreds she had known as she did towards Bertie. Ah, what a cruel mistake her marriage had been! It was a

terrible thing—she felt the fact in all its force just now—to be mated to a creature who appreciated neither her beauty nor her virtues; it was a terrible thing, after the blissful life she had been leading, to look forward to those sultry plains, those dismal evenings, those abominable books that he tried to read aloud, those dreary homilies about aims and objects and purposes. — Oh, dear, the bare recollection of it all was positively distressing! And what right had he to dictate, or seem to dictate, in his letters what she should or should not do? She was her own mistress, free to do as she pleased while he was away. Ah, while he was away—yes, while he was away! Quite so, while he was away. But he would come back—and then? Oh, bother! “What a fool I was,” she said to herself, “to marry in such a hurry; it was my mother’s fault. He and I have not an idea in common, and there must be some way out of such a ridiculous position. I see what men are now; I can tell those worth marrying, and those not. The Transport, indeed!”

That her husband should be serving in the Transport was a special source of annoyance and humiliation to Mrs. Vraile. Whenever she was asked what Jim was doing at the front, the invariable remark of the questioner, when she answered, was, “Oh, in’ the Transport!” in a tone of toleration excessively irritating. Transport officers were non-combatants, which meant, so she understood, that they drove cattle and never did any fighting. Now Mr. Rook’s brother was an A.D.C.; and though Jim at one time had talked a great deal about getting an A.D.C.-ship, it had all ended in talk and nothing more. The

Transport, she supposed, was considered good enough for him. But the Civil Service was better than any soldiering; Bertie was thought far more of than any colonel or major, not to say captain. Bertie—she wondered what he was going to do for her, he had not said.

She was not left long in doubt; Signor Pelliti and one or two other gentlemen sent in their accounts receipted. The delicacy of the whole proceeding enchanted her; Bertie was a noble fellow as well as a nobleman. She went here, there and everywhere in search of him with thanks—and a kiss even, if he cared to take it—upon her lips. But Mr. Rook was a wise man in his generation, and a diplomat to boot; he had gone, she learnt, upon a secret mission into the interior, and would not be back for a week or ten days. At the end of a fortnight he had not returned, and every additional day's absence increased her desire to see him. She missed him terribly, for, somehow, her old admirers did not rush to fill his vacant place so eagerly as might have been expected, though fresh ones, who did not know of his existence, were fairly attentive. But they were none of them like him.

Meanwhile official Simla was in a flutter; chuprassees rushed hither and thither with minutes and large envelopes, and the news of the British defeat was upon everybody's lips. A garrison was cut off and cooped up within the walls of an isolated fort daily expecting to be attacked. A march, destined afterwards to live in history, was to be undertaken, perilous as it was, as the only means of relief. All this interested Lucy but little; she had received a letter from Jim—no remit-

tance—dated a few days after the catastrophe, so he at any rate was safe enough. He just alluded to the disaster at the end of his letter, but for the most part it was filled with complaints about himself, verbal meanderings into subjects of no special interest—most of them sheer nonsense—and, so far as she had deciphered the hurriedly-written sheets, questions about the child. She put the letter in the drawer with the rest, and thought no more about it until a few days afterwards at a picnic party.

The subject of a ball was under discussion. It was to have been the ball of the season, but there was a rumour current that it would be indefinitely postponed, if not put off altogether, on account of the recent news. Lucy was listening with the deepest interest to what Mrs. Palmira, Mrs. Lovejoy, and their usual accompaniments, Mr. Hicks and Major Hercules, had to say upon the subject.

“It is sure to be all right,” said sanguine Mrs. Lovejoy at last; “the General tells me that they have squared it, and he ought to know as he is on the committee.”

“But for all that, it won’t be for a jolly long time yet,” sighed Major Hercules, looking affectionately at his *inamorata pro tem*.

“Time enough,” said Mrs. Palmira; “long before I’ve outlived Mr. Hicks’s fidelity, and time enough to give Bertie a chance of coming back—eh, Lucy?”

Lucy blushed with pleasure.

“By the way,” asked young Hicks, “have you heard anything further of Jim, Mrs. Vraille?”

“Anything further!” repeated Lucy. “How do you mean?”

"What, don't you know?"

Then they all told her: Jim's convoy—at least one that he happened to be marching with, for of course Colonel Dare was in command—had been cut to pieces, and he and the Colonel had only escaped by the skin of their teeth.

"They say he behaved splendidly," said Major Hercules.

"Who did?" asked Lucy.

"Why, not old Dare!" roared the giant in name.

"And since you seem so ignorant of what every one is talking about," exclaimed Mrs. Lovejoy with all the good nature of womanly friendship, "and know so little of your own husband's affairs, perhaps I've got a nice little surprise in store for you. The General said this morning that the V.C. was talked of—unofficially, of course."

"Oh!" said Lucy.

"But he only did his duty after all," objected bold young Hicks.

"Wait till you do yours as well, then see what you think," said Hercules.

"Serves you right, Mr. Hicks," said Mrs. Palmira to her youthful and eager swain. "Don't talk about things you don't understand, V.C.'s included."

"You are jealous," continued Mrs. Lovejoy, adding her stroke to Hicks's chastisement, "because you could not get up to the front yourself, like Captain Vraille and Major Hercules, and a host of others."

This was touching the young gentleman on the raw. He writhed, and in defiance of Mrs. Palmira's warning eye, retorted hotly—

"Of course he behaved well, we all know that; but I say again he won't get the V.C., if it is only because the convoy was attacked by tribes supposed to be friendly, and the whole things will be hushed up as much as possible."

"Shut up!" said Mrs. Palmira, peremptorily, knowing that there was more truth than caution in the angry youth's remarks. Hicks did shut up; but other tongues were not so easily silenced, and a lady, who cared nothing for Mrs. Palmira's glances, started the subject afresh.

"I suppose you know," she said, addressing the company in general, "that the man he saved is dead."

"Dead! Colonel Dare dead! You don't say so!"

"So I heard this morning. I believe there is no doubt about it."

"Dear me," said Mrs. Palmira, quite pathetically, "it is only the other day, as it were, that I saw him; and we met his daughter at dinner—don't you remember, Lucy?—while she was staying with Mrs. Phelps."

Lucy remembered her distinctly—a dark plain girl, who sang some German songs rather well.

"The Miss Dare I mean, Mrs. Vraile," said the lady with the news stiffly, "does not sing 'rather well,' she has a lovely voice, and is not particularly plain, either. Perhaps you are thinking of some one else?"

"Oh dear no," Lucy replied promptly; "it is the same. My husband took her in to dinner that night—he knew her in England—and I recollect he told me she was Colonel Dare's daughter. I certainly thought she was plain, but perhaps it was only the unbecoming dress she had on, and—"

"Any way," said the other, cutting in sharply on Lucy's reminiscences, "she is a friend of mine, and her father's death will be a terrible blow to her. She has no mother; the Colonel was not very well off, I fear, and she will be left without a penny in the world, and with scarcely a relation to help her. Indeed, I know she wished to try and earn her own living in England instead of coming out with her father, but he would not hear of it. What she will do now I really don't know."

"Dear, dear! How very sad! Poor thing!"

And then the conversation turned again upon the ball. Such is the mutability of human interests!

Miss Dare's affairs were matters of little consequence to Lucy, and she soon forgot all about them; but for some time to come she pondered over what she had heard about Jim. To begin with, she did not believe there was much truth in it. Jim was a non-combatant; and though she knew that a war was going on somewhere, and that battles of a kind were being fought, she had always imagined that the Afghans were the people killed, wounded, taken prisoners and that sort of thing, not the English, still less the non-combatant English. A war to her meant marching a long way off, shooting so many black men, and marching home again; a campaign, living in tents; a battle, a lot of men leaving those tents in the morning, going without dinner perhaps that day, and returning in the evening rather tired. Until now she had never dreamed of such a thing as Jim distinguishing himself; and, as it was, she had not the slightest idea what he had done. She supposed he had had a stroke of his usual good

luck; and she was decidedly glad, for people could no longer look upon her as the wife of a Transport officer who never fought. Jim's stroke of fortune would raise her in their estimation; she was glad, and, with one thing and another, quite happy again.

There were two other inmates of the little villa gladdened also by the news when it reached them. They expressed their feelings in different ways, and neither of them as the mistress of the house expressed hers.

"There's been dreadful fighting, baby boy," said one, "and the poor pretty soldiers that I showed you the pictures of many and many a time has been pouring out their blood—redder than the coats they don't wear in them parts—upon the dust, for their country and their Queen, and their pay, pretty chick! Lord love yer bright eyes, how they do stare, to be sure! I do believe as yer understands ivery blessed word as is said to yer. Now listen to Lalla, honey, and she'll tell yer—though why you should call me Lalla when my name's Judith and nothin' else, yer sweet innocence only knows."

"Lal-la, Lal-l-l-la," said an appreciative little voice, lingering over the labials.

"Lalla it shall be then—that's understood; I suppose the word comes handier to yer baby tongue. Well, they was fightin' and fightin' through the heat" (but she said *'eat*) "of the day—all of 'em fightin', sargints, ginerals, corprils, drummers, sargint-majors and all; an' them as was left, when the fightin' was done, bleedin' as they was, had to march and march all through the night, without a band, without so much as a ration or a drop o' rum between 'em; no gee-gees to ride, no——"

"Gee-gee, gee-gee; gee-up, gee-gee!" Then followed gurgling sounds expressive of enthusiasm, and the little face of the listener looked up, his eyes sparkling with delight. He even tried to clap his hands, but they clung together when they met and refused to part; the little fingers clasped and unclasped themselves, then separated and wandered away down Judith's dress, until one of them found a button-hole, into which it crept. The baby eyes followed the investigations of the finger, and the baby mind lost the thread of the discourse in contemplating the mysteries of the button-hole.

"And one brave man—one big, brave man, who fought harder than them all, and bled the most, and had the least to eat and drink—came back about 'revell'y' the next mornin'; and that big, brave man—now look at Lalla whilst she tells yer, sweet—was dad-da! Now say it after Lalla, baby boy—dad-da!"

"Dad—dee, dad-dee," repeated the struggling little tongue.

"Dad-dee'll do; it's near enough, and prettier p'r'aps. No, sit ye still now, an' don't ye wriggle to get down; them little legs'll grow all crooked if they're allus walkin'—time enough for walkin'; talkin's different. Listen now to Lalla, boy, and try to talk. No? Well, what is it yer want, sweetheart?"

"Tonee, tonee—Lalla, tonee." A dimpled arm wandered out into the air, and a podgy little finger tried to point. There was not a soul on earth but one who could have interpreted the foolish little talk and the feeble little signs. But that one happened to be near, and Judith understood.

“Lalla’s tonee? What yer can see to like in the old thing I can’t think; but a rajah himself would give yer all the tonees in his palace if he could but see yer ask” (she said *arst* though) “for ’em like that. Here, take yer tonee, chick! Lalla loves yer.” She got up out of her chair as she spoke and gave the boy an ivory brooch off the dressing-table. It was of Indian workmanship, and represented an elephant—the only ornament of any kind that Judith Foresight had ever been known to wear. She never wore it now; she would never wear it again in all probability, for the sharp steel pin behind it had been wrenched off when little Jim had first taken a fancy to the miniature animal, which, for reasons totally unknown, he called a tonee.

His fingers clutched his treasure and held it tight, and his cheeks and chin dimpled into smiles as he looked at it with his round eyes of nondescript colour, and talked to it in the language all his own.

“Ah, when I see your sweet face look like that,” cried Judith Foresight, kissing the silky flax upon the boy’s bent head, “I seem to see your daddee once again, only small like. He is the big, brave man that you and I was talking of just now, my baby bright—the sort the pretty soldiers likes to follow, and the Queen loves, when she pins the bits of silver on to ’em in a line with the second button from the top, just a little this-ways from the centre of the left breast—I knows the place right well. Them’s the sort, honey!—with hearts like lions’ hearts, but all the time as tender—and, God help him! sometimes as innocent—as your own.”

“Tonee, Lalla, tonee! ’Ook, Lalla, tonee. Oh! tonee—de-ar—ton-nee!”

“And many’s the time I’ve seen him creep on tiptoe into yer room o’ nights, baby, and bend over yer wee face; and now, when he comes back, you’ll be ‘no longer weeny as yer was, but he’s got to see yer walk and hear”—it is a pity, perhaps, that she said ‘ear—“yer talk. And he’s got to learn from yer that dogs is bow-wows, cats is minnies, birds tweets, ducks quack-quars, an’ all sorts o’ gibberish that he never learned before, but for all that will soon know a mighty lot about, I’ll warrant.”

“Baby by-by, Lalla; by-by—by-by-ee-ee.”

The ivory elephant had fallen to the ground; the little face turned wearily to Judith’s breast; the little arms wandered round about her neck; the tiny hands toyed for a few idle moments with the buttons of her dress, then fell listlessly down, down. The flaxen head drooped; the heavy eyelids closed; the babbling voice cooed for a time in unison with the droning lullaby that soothed the busy little mind into forgetfulness, and then was still. The child, in all the trustfulness of its childhood—in the fearlessness of perfect ignorance, which knows neither sin nor harm, nor sorrow—fell fast asleep in the arms of the adamantine-looking woman.

She bent her head over that of the sleeping boy, and gently—as gently as a leaf falls to the ground on a summer day—dropped a kiss upon his upturned face. Then, crooning all the time, she carried him across the room and laid him on her bed.

There was a noise upon the stair outside, and with her finger on her lip, she turned towards the opening door and said “*S-s-h-h!*” rather peremptorily to her mistress.

"All right, all right, I can see he's asleep; you need not *s-s-h-h* me like that. Here, send one of the men with this note to Mr. Rook, and tell him to wait for an answer."

Judith frowned like a thunder-cloud as she departed on her errand, but she said nothing, not even "Yes, m'm."

He had returned at last, and she had sent a little note asking him to tiffen. Weeks had passed since she had received Jim's last letter. He was sulking, she supposed. Very good. That need not interfere with her enjoyment; and now that Bertie was back——

The child upon the bed turned in his sleep and lay with his face towards her.

"Upon my word," said Lucy aloud to herself, "I positively *love* Bertie."

The baby's eyes were still shut, but he fidgeted about on the bed and muttered to himself something that sounded like "tonee, tonee."

"*S-s-h-h!*" said Lucy, "go to sleep and don't knock about like that. Dear me, what a time Judith is."

Instead of doing as he was told like an obedient boy, little Jim opened his eyes and stared at her. "Tonee, Lalla, tonee," he said.

"*S-s-h-h!*" said Lucy again, and she patted him. This, instead of soothing him, woke him outright. He struggled up on to his knees, and looking at Lucy, began to cry dismally. She picked him up and set him on her knee. Then he lifted up his voice and fairly yelled.

"Oh! bub, bub," he said, as well as his choking

voice would let him; "oh, Lalla, Lalla, tonee, to-n-ee-ee!"—and he writhed and wriggled on Lucy's lap, and refused to be comforted.

"I don't know what you mean by tonee, you naughty little boy; be quiet, do! Well, then, if you will go, go;" and she set him on his legs upon the floor.

Crying all the way, he staggered across the floor and made for the door. After many swerving divergences out of his true course and much perilous oscillation of his small person, he gained the door without a fall, and holding on to it for support, cried, "Tonee, tonee; oh, bub, bub, Lalla," with a whole world of woe in every syllable and an ocean of distress in every sob.

But relief was close at hand. A step sounded on the stair outside, the door opened, and Judith snatched him up in her arms and covered his face with kisses.

"What is it, baby boy?"

"Tonee, Lalla, tonee," he moaned, only half comforted. His ideas this time were perfectly collected, and his purpose fixed.

Judith looked about on the floor for the elephant brooch; found it under the chair where it had fallen, and gave it to him. His cries ceased; he held his "tonee" tightly in his hand, and in ten minutes was sound asleep again in Judith's arms.

Lucy had watched the various phases of the whole performance with some interest.

"How did you know he wanted that?" she asked, indicating the brooch.

"I knows *heverythink* he wants," said Judith, with a disdainful sniff.

“But how?”

“By watchin’ of him, by bein’ with him night an’ day, day an’ night; by teachin’ him as well as I can—I never had but one child o’ me own, and he died—an’ by learnin’ of him, too. Children ain’t to be understood by every now and then just a-lookin’ at ’em; they’re wiser than we thinks for, an’ they takes a deal o’ knowin’.”

This was the rude way in which Judith sometimes addressed her mistress, leaving out all her usual “m’ms,” and filling their rightful places with frowns. Lucy had often scolded her elderly handmaiden for the brusqueness of her manner, and on one memorable occasion had threatened her with dismissal. But the scoldings had been barren of result; and as to the threat, Judith had simply smiled at it, saying she was under “the Captin’s orders” as commanding officer and paymaster in one. Judith was one of Jim’s hobbies, and Lucy knew that it was of little use writing to him complaining of her conduct. She had tried the effect of doing so more than once, and as she never got any redress, was forced to fight her own battles with indifferent success, put up with affronts, or hotly resent them, only to be laughed at, as sometimes happened, and stomach many indignities, all for the sake of a pig-headed husband’s foolish^h whim. Not that she really wanted Judith to go—Mrs. Foresight was a valuable woman in many ways, and one not easily replaced—but she wished her to know her position. With this object in view, she had solicited Jim’s assistance, quarrelled repeatedly with Judith herself, and, latterly, treated her with silent contempt

when she was inclined to be impertinent. On the present occasion she swept from the room with haughty indifference to her last remark.

Within an hour her note to Mr. Rook was answered by that gentleman in person. They had a delightful little tiffen together, and then rode down to the gymkhana and watched the races side by side, with every one looking at them. Lucy was supremely happy, and conscious of looking her very best.

Mrs. Lovejoy came up to her smiling, and Lucy wondered what unpleasantness was in store for her behind that smile.

"Glad to see you back, Mr. Rook," said charming little Mrs. Lovejoy "and how is your husband, Mrs. Vraille?"

"Oh, all right," said Lucy,

Mrs. Lovejoy opened her eyes a little as if in surprise, and said, "So glad to hear it—some one told me just now he was very ill; but of course *you* ought to know. Charming day, is it not?" and away she fluttered.

"Of all the spiteful little painted things I ever came across," said Lucy, as she and Bertie rode homewards through the pines and rhododendrons, "that Mrs. Lovejoy is the spitefullest and most painted."

Mr. Rook laughed.

"Never mind her, Lucy," he said; "you can afford to forgive a little spite, and her jealousy is as natural as—well, her complexion is not. Look! there's a sunset for you."

It was a gorgeous evening. The Himalayas were bathed in a flood of gold. Above and below the pine-

tops bowed and swayed in the gentle air, and the little waterfalls that tumbled over the mossy rocks and sparkled amid the bracken soothed the senses with their whispering splash. Under the leafy heights of classic Jakkho they drew rein to admire the view. It could not but appeal to the least observant of nature's beauties. Range after range of purple mountain, bank upon bank of fleecy cloud, stretched before them out to the horizon, and there the perpetual snows drew a long white line across the background of the picture.

"It's lovely," said Lucy, with a long-drawn sigh "I should so like to see the snows quite close."

"Would you? You shall. The very thing. We'll make up a party and go. How lucky you thought of it! We will have a ten-days' picnic in Elysium—the last and best picnic of the season, the last before I leave—leave for good, you know, Lucy dearest."

They talked over the project as they rode home—the home, that is, that Jim had provided for Lucy and paid the rent of through the bank. They discussed it in earnest that evening and for the next ten days. At the end of a fortnight it was all settled, merry little party and all. Lucy was delighted.

Nothing occurred to mar her prospective pleasure, until the day before that settled on for the start. Then, at last, she received a letter from Jim. It was brusque and short; he was coming home, he said, on sick leave. It was too bad. But as she reflected that the picnic would in all probability be over before he could arrive—he mentioned no date—she decided that his letter should not spoil her pleasure and that of other people. She stuffed it into the drawer

where the rest were, and said nothing about it to any one.

There was a great deal of packing to be done, but, as most of it had fallen to Judith's share, that good lady, tough as she was, was not sorry to see the cavalcade depart. She was, moreover, glad of an opportunity to overhaul little Jim's wardrobe, which had fallen into a state that had caused many a battle royal between herself and her mistress. With scissors and needle and a large roll of calico, she set herself to work, and a week of comparative rest and absolute peace slipped away. But on the afternoon of the eighth day, a telegram, addressed to Mrs. Vraille, caused her great disquietude. Not knowing where her mistress was, further than that she was on a roving tour in the interior, she despatched a syce with the telegram, telling him to run with it along the road toward the snow mountains as fast as his legs could carry him, and not to stop until he had delivered it into the mem-sahib's own hands.

The syce grinned and departed, running like a madman—until he was out of sight.

But out of sight was not out of mind so far as Judith was concerned. That telegram weighed upon her spirits, and she was inclined to be melancholy in her discourse with little Jim. A heavy day had passed—and another—and she had put him to bed.

"Ah! baby boy," she said as she sat beside his little cot, working at an insignificant-looking bit of a shirt, "if you only knew, if *he* only knew—daddee, as yer will call him, though I've told yer times and times it's dadda. You sleep there in yer foolish little

ignorance, an' he, maybe, is fightin' still, or lyin' sick in hospital—if there be sich things as hospitals in them foreign parts—or dead, for all they know or care. Or maybe he'll soon be comin' home; an' Lalla, as yer calls her, bless yer! don't know now whether she be glad or sorry."

No servant in the house could tread like that! None of them wore boots, and those were heavy boots! Who was it?

Judith was no coward, but when the door opened and a grey-haired, black-bearded man, dressed in very shabby yellow clothing, walked into the room, she could not find her voice to ask him what he wanted.

"Is no one about? Am I to break into my own house as if I were a thief? Where's Lucy—Mrs. Vraile, I mean? What, Judith, don't you know me?"

"Lawks-a-mercy, no, sir, I did not! Oh, master, how you've changed!"

CHAPTER XI.

HOME.

CHANGED? Yes, he was changed! A month or two of intermittent fever changes most men. It makes them shaky in the legs, stiff in the joints, hollow-eyed and cheeked, sallow-complexioned; it rarely leaves them without carrying off with it all superfluous flesh, and sometimes gives them a stoop in the shoulders, until they get their lost strength back again. Yes, Jim was certainly changed.

"No one came to meet me," he said. "I was disappointed. All the day through I had looked forward—I had expected, I mean, to be met, as I had sent a telegram. I wanted a pony to ride, and had to borrow one. I did not even know the way, you see. But it doesn't matter."

Judith did not answer, and he did not seem to expect an answer; his eyes had wandered to the bed, and walking across the room, he stood beside it, looking at the sleeping child.

For a time, that seemed to Judith interminably long, he stood there without speaking. At last he looked up and whispered softly, "Is this the little bit of a thing I left behind? Why, Judith, he has grown out of all knowledge."

"Yes, sir, he be growed!" said Judith, in a foolish,

constrained sort of way, as if she were feeling the whole situation exceedingly uncomfortable.

"When'll he wake up?" whispered Jim.

"Not till to-morrow, I hopes, sir."

"Oh, not till to-morrow, won't he? Walk about a bit and talk now, can he? Good boy, is he?"

"Lor, sir, yes; very good boy indeed!" said Judith, promptly; "but yer see, sir, yer musn't wake him up by talkin'."

"No, nò, of course not," said Jim; "I'll go away now. Good-night, little chap—see you to-morrow!" He stole across the room on tip-toe, stepping high and looking very absurd in his endeavours to move noiselessly. When he had reached the door, he turned and beckoned to Judith. "Where shall I find Mrs. Vraile?" he whispered. "I saw no one about the place when I came in."

"She's out," said Judith; "but if you go down to the drawin'-room and wait for five minutes, I'll get yer somethin' to eat. You must want it bad; you look so worn and tired like."

He descended the stairs, making as little noise as possible, found his way back to the drawing-room, through which he had already passed in his search about the house, and flung himself upon a sofa, for he was, as he muttered to himself, "dead beat!"

He had travelled a hundred miles in a dhoolie, scarcely knowing how the days went; he had been shaken to pieces in tongas and gharries; he had spent thirty hours in the train, thinking it a haven of luxury, although the thermometer had averaged some ninety-five degrees the whole time. He had lost nearly

the whole of his kit through moth and rust and fish insect and red ant—through the carelessness of others and his own helplessness—and was wearing the kharkee clothing that had been sweated through and through a thousand times, with a shabby old shooting-coat thrown over it. He had travelled eighty miles that day; foot by foot he had risen out of the sweltering heat into the delicious atmosphere of the hills; he had galloped homeward along the Mall on a borrowed pony—only to find that she was out. He looked about him and saw that the room he was lying in was tasteful in the extreme; and yet he was ungrateful enough to feel disappointed.

Judith put her head in at the door. “Yer bearer’s come,” she said, “with some o’ yer things. If yer’ll come along o’ me, I’ll show yer yer room. By the time yer ready for dinner, it’ll be ready for you; least-ways somethin’ ’ll be ready, for there ain’t much in the house.”

Mrs. Foresight was usually a silent woman, as Jim very well remembered, and he was rather surprised at her present volubility. She kept up a running fire of comment and small-talk as he followed her across the hall, and gave him no opportunity of making any remarks on his own account. But, by dint of “speaking through her,” he at last managed to squeeze in the questions he was most anxious to put.

“Where’s your mistress? How long hâs she been out? When do you expect her back?”

“There, that’s the door, sir,” said Judith, taking not the slightest notice; “I’ve put yer clean towels an’

soap an' 'ot water, an' if yer wants anythin', yer've only got to shout, as I shall be in here seein' to yer dinner."

All this struck Jim as rather strange. Lucy had often complained to him of Judith's rudeness, and he began to think that she had just cause of complaint. But there was that in Judith's demeanour that seemed to indicate that his arrival was totally unexpected. Moreover, there were no servants about the house; no signs of preparation for him, much less of welcome. Where could Lucy be? It was too late for any afternoon entertainment, too early for an evening one, unless it were a dinner-party; and surely she would not have dined out on the very evening of his return without leaving some sort of message. She had gone to meet him, and had missed him in the dark—that was it, probably.

In the dining-room he found a cold collation awaiting his attentions, and attacked it with vigour. Then he took a good pull at a brandy-and-soda, and felt altogether happier. But all this time he had been waiting upon himself; and just as he was beginning to vow vengeance on Lucy's khitmatgars, Judith appeared with a couple of poached eggs.

"Why are you bringing in those things yourself?" he asked. "Where are the servants?"

"They are gone with mistress—that's the truth. I did not want to bother yer with a lot o' talk directly yer come home, but Mrs. Vraillie's gone on an expedition inter the interior, and took most o' the servants with her; that's how it is."

"Gone on an expedition? With whom?"

"Mrs. Palmira, most like, though I did not see her; and Mrs. Lovejoy was of the party."

"How long have they been gone?"

"About a week."

"Then she ought to have had my letter before she started?"

Judith did not answer.

"And the telegram?"

"I sent that on, sir."

"Oh," said Jim, dreamily, "you sent that on? When do you expect Mrs. Vraille back?"

"To-morrow or next day," said Judith, mendaciously, for she had no grounds for making such an assertion.

"Oh, that's it, then," he said, with an air of relief, helping himself to a poached egg; "she thought she would be back in time—any way the telegram will fetch her back to-morrow or next day. You sent it by a runner, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir, the quickest runner in the stable."

"Do you mean you gave it to a syce to take? Humph! Well, it doesn't matter. Tell me, Judith, has Mrs. Vraille been well and strong all the time I've been away?"

Judith hastened to reassure him. "Oh, yes, sir, perfectly well, never had a day's sickness that I knows on." Somehow her answer did not seem to have the effect intended. He sighed rather wearily, and then began talking about the child. She gave him all the information he required, which took a considerable time, and then left him, "to see," as she said, "after the airin' o' the sheets."

He strolled back into the drawing-room, feeling

lonely in his own house, and when his bearer had brought him a pair of slippers, flung himself upon the sofa again, and lighted a pipe. A pipe! A pipe had not desecrated that sanctum since Lucy had called it a boudoir, though many a cigarette had been consumed amid its dainty etceteras by admirers of its taste and elegance.

The fumes from his pipe rose up and up; he watched them idly, moving neither hand nor foot. He was dog-tired. He had come a long, long way to reach his home, and now that he had reached it there was not a soul but this hard-faced servant to welcome him—even his child was sound asleep. When he had left the camp, Dr. Dick had pulled aside the curtain of his dhoolie and bade him God-speed. "You'll do well enough now, old fellow," he had said—Jim could recall every word—"and a very little home-nursing will set you on your legs again." Others beside Dr. Dick had come to bid him good-bye, for he had been a sort of celebrity in the camp, because of the convoy business. Did he wish himself back again, after all—back in that infernal hospital among the flies, where day after day he had lain in a sort of stupor, listening to their incessant buzz, and where night after night he had imagined his body to be a log of wood which it was his bounden duty to roll over with his hands, but could not? No; of course he wished no such thing! And yet Dr. Dick had been very kind, as kind—yes, he supposed the simile was a good one, since everybody used it—as kind as a woman. "I went full of ambition—full of ambition," he mused, speaking to himself as there was no one else to talk to; and he felt talkatively

inclined. "My ambition has been more than fulfilled, and now I have come back. Ah, Lucy darling, little did I think when I wrote you that long letter of complaint what the next four-and-twenty hours had in store for me! Poor old Dare! I wish now I had not abused him so much. It was unkind of Dick to say that the worst turn he ever did me was to die just—well, well, he's gone, and it can't be helped. How Dick did hate him! So did I once, and I'm sorry."

His pipe went out, and he got up to knock the ashes into the fire-place before refilling it. On the mantel-piece he saw a photograph of himself taken in England. It stood in front of a looking-glass. From the face in the little gilt frame to that reflected in the mirror his eyes wandered to and fro.

"Well!" he said at last, "I need not be surprised that Judith did not recognise me at first." Then he looked at the photographs of the other people who ornamented the mantelpiece. Herbert Rook in a frock-coat; Herbert Rook in a shooting-jacket. "Bah! I never cared for that chap!" he said, as he turned his back upon the fire-place. Herbert Rook looked at him from a small work-table. Then, as his eyes roamed round the room, they fell upon the handsome face in two or three other places. "A gallery of him," said Jim, and he started on a tour of inspection.

Upon every table, what-not, bracket, shelf, were photographs, nearly all of them of Lucy. She had, it appeared to Jim, been taken in every conceivable pose, and in every imaginable costume. He gazed long and earnestly at each, trying to make up his mind which picture represented the beautiful features to their

fullest advantage, and fancied that that in which she and Herbert Rook had been taken together in riding-dress had caught her most charming expression.

Thus passed James Vraille's first evening at home; and only too glad of the excuse of having nothing to do, he went to bed.

He slept late, and did not breakfast until nearly ten o'clock. That meal disposed of, he had thoughts of visiting the nursery; but not liking to obtrude himself on Judith's domain, drew a chair into the verandah and sat looking at the misty mountains as he smoked his pipe. He could see the tonga-road winding away into the distance, and was trying to follow its intricacies, when the noise of pattering feet on the board flooring of the verandah made him turn his head.

Near the corner of the house stood a little figure, something little more than a foot and a half high.

"Hallo, little chap; come here and let's have a look at you!"

He leant forward and held out his arms.

Little Jim did not budge; his round eyes stared at the bearded man unblinking, fixed and steadfast; his small body swayed unsteadily, and one finger pulled down the corner of his mouth.

"Can't you walk, little chap—only stand? Will you be frightened if I come and fetch you?"

A hoarse voice from behind the angle of the house whispered—"Say daddee, baby; say it quick for Lalla."

Vraille probably thought it good policy not to notice this stage direction from the prompter, and as if unconscious of it, continued his persuasions, but with-

out making any visible impression. Then a thought struck him, and taking a large silver watch from his pocket, he touched the spring and opened the back. This performance he repeated two or three times, blowing on the watch so as to make it appear that that was the sesame of the phenomenon. The experiment told; the attraction was irresistible; and by slow and very unsteady degrees little Jim approached nearer and nearer, Vraille going on with the performance as if his life depended on it.

When the boy had arrived at measurable distance, Jim held out the watch to him and said, "Blow!"

Puffing out his cheeks as he had seen Jim do, the boy blew. *Mirabile dictu!* The watch opened. His face expanded; his eyes dilated; he laughed a fat little laugh, and said—"Gain."

"Again, I suppose you mean. Come on, then. Here it goes again. Now—blow!"

Pouff! The same result. The same chuckle.

"Now come and sit on my knee and try. Come on, my man, I would not hurt a hair of your head for ten thousand pounds!"

The child looked up into his face with that intense expression of profound thought that lends childhood the momentary air of age, and gives its complete ignorance the transitory appearance of unutterable sagacity. Then, in a flash, it was all gone. The child was a child again; the child's face smiled, and the child's voice suddenly exclaimed—

"Daddee!"

"My boy—my little chap!"

The victory was won—the victory that so few know

how to set about to win—so easy for some, yet so very hard for others.

Jim, as he watched the cherub mouth blowing at the watch, felt a lump rise in his throat. Why was it that the sight of the boy made him feel sad, when all the time it was filling him with happiness? As he felt the feather-weight upon his knee, he longed to hug it to his heart, but dared not for fear of frightening the boy—his boy—his own son. As he felt the tiny fingers cling tightly to one of his own, a thrill shot through his frame—such as he had never before experienced in his whole life.

Judith's rugged countenance presently appeared from behind the house-corner, and a lesson in experimental philosophy occupied Jim's attention for the next half-hour. The watch was opened and re-opened a thousand times. It was dropped and picked up again; it was listened to in silence, pushed away in petulance; it was handled with the delicate yet awkward touch of little Jim's small fingers; it was sucked, and very probably seriously damaged—but what did that matter? Vraile listened to the unintelligible language of his child, and strove to understand it as diligently as in former days he had striven to master the Hindustani grammar.

"I shall know better what he means a week hence," he said to Judith.

"Lor, sir, he can tell that as well as you or me. I knowed he'd come to yer of his own accord, if let alone. Children knows what's what—though 'taint my place to say so—better than most grow'd folk."

"I never thought, you know," said Jim, looking up

with something of his son's simplicity in his smile, "that I cared for babies. When I was a young fellow, Judith, I never thought about anything but pleasure—pleasure—pleasure. I never found it—upon my soul I don't believe I ever found it *real*, you know, until to-day. The idea of babies is associated in a man's mind with sickness and crying and dribbling; but this little chap is clean and healthy-looking, and isn't sick, and smells nice, and never cries. Hallo!"

Not too fast James Vraille; you have a lot to learn yet! The child's nether lip had sunk, displaying only very few teeth; the happy face was puckered into many distressful wrinkles; the wide-open eyes had closed, and the cheerful voice of a moment ago was giving forth a series of the most dismal wails. Jim was quite unable to account for this sudden manifestation of grief, and looked perplexedly at Judith; but Judith, without assigning any cause for it, snatched the boy up in her arms, and carried him off into the house with many mumbled expressions of endearment.

Vraille's occupation for the time was gone, and leaving word where he was to be found should Lucy return while he was out, he sallied forth to the Head-quarter Office to report himself and make sundry inquiries concerning his leave. The staff official at the office greeted him cordially.

"Let me congratulate you on your promotion to a home station, Vraille," he said, "and on other matters that have reached us—unofficially as yet. There was some hitch about the recommendation, I hear; but no doubt it will come in time?"

Instead of answering the implied question, Major

Vraille blushed. He knew what the hitch was; he knew, moreover, that it was a very serious hitch, one that destroys many hopes, defeats many objects, and upsets many calculations—death; and so he stammered out his thanks for the other's congratulations, applied for a few weeks' leave pending his embarkation for England, and took his departure.

As he strolled along the Mall, he noticed that many nicely-dressed people stared at him, some of them even whispering as he passed, and turning to stare after him. He was aware that his appearance was not all that might be desired, and on his way to the Club called at a tailor's to order a suit of clothes. The tailor, who was also a dressmaker, seemed very pleased to see him, and after taking his measure, mentioned a small outstanding account of Mrs. Vraille's.

"Well, send it in," said Jim.

"Very good, sir, I will; I will address it to you, if you will allow me."

"As you please," Jim replied, wondering what the man meant.

Finding some acquaintances at the Club, he stayed there to lunch, registered his name for election, and strolled home again. But Lucy had not returned; and after the passage of a few compliments between himself and little Jim, he went back to the Club again and tried to read the papers; but he felt lonely and ill at ease—he could settle to nothing until his wife returned. He longed to see her. Sick of movement as he was, and much as he wanted rest, he wandered about and could not rest. His heart was full, and aching to be relieved of its long-borne burden; his tongue

itched to tell her of his successes; his very arms seemed useless until they had held her in their embrace. He could find no peace, and rather than spend his time alone he spent it at the Club.

But it was not all dreariness. The next morning, after breakfast, little Jim, with his hair brushed and in a clean pinafore, made his appearance, and the silver watch was again produced. The old performance was repeated several times with great effect; but it palled at last, and the watch was put away—"to by-by," as little Jim said.

Then the conversation took several jumps and turns in all kinds of unexpected directions, until it finally settled down more or less steadily to the subject of natural history. The child lectured, the man took notes—mental ones. Little Jim, seated on big Jim's knee, with an open book on the subject before him, proceeded to demonstrate his remarks with a fat inch-and-a-quarter fore-finger, while his pupil listened attentively.

He bubbled and spluttered and cooed and crowed; he struggled with words that would not come, and passed on to others, repeating a few favourites many dozen times before he could make up his mind to part with them. He turned over the pages of the book furiously in his search for one particularly graphic illustration of an ass which occupied more of his admiration and affection than any other picture in the collection—a predilection visibly accentuated by dirty finger marks. When he had found the donkey, he gloated over him, saying "gonkey—de-ar—gonkey," over and over again in many different tones of voice; and when the "gonkey's" charms failed—always

suddenly—to attract, he turned over a dozen pages at once, and called Vraille's attention to a bow-wow, or a baa, or a boo, or quack-quar, but invariably returned again—impulsively, and with all the eagerness of a perfectly novel idea—to his old friend the gonkey.

Now this part of Jim's lesson was simple enough; but when he looked into the child's eager little face, he could read there the truth of Mrs. Foresight's oft-repeated remark, that "children took a deal o' knowin'." There was much in that busy little brain that he knew nothing of, and perhaps, study as he might, would never know. There was no margin in that little mind; it was filled full of the one idea that happened to be occupying it for the second. Then that idea was banished, utterly banished by another. Like a flash of light, the "gonkey" in the book was wholly displaced by a "gickey-bird" in the air. (In the picture-book the same animal was a "tweet"—why was that?) And each idea, with all its attributes, was summed up in a single word; each thought, it seemed, expressed in some quaint sound. But then, when Jim had made some foolish remark or other, an air of deep abstraction settled on the baby face, and the man, with all his knowledge, felt that it was beyond mortal power to determine the silent workings of the baby mind at that given moment.

"Are you so simple, so pure, that you can commune with the angels, my little chap?" Vraille whispered in the boy's ear during one of these fits of mental abstraction.

The child laughed. The breath of the whisper had tickled his cheek. It was funny. "'Gain," he said.

"I would do it again lots of times, my boy, my baby boy; but Judith says you must go to sleep now for a bit."

"Lalla!"

"Yes, Lalla. Good-bye, little chap. Daddee 'll play with the boy again to-morrow." (He was getting quite proficient.)

But on the morrow, when the morning talk was over, and the child asleep, and Lucy still not come, his stock of patience suddenly gave out. "There is a pony in the stable," he said to Judith, "and if Mrs. Vraille has not returned within the next two hours, I'm off to meet her."

"No, sir, don't do that," said Judith with much more animation than was usual with her; "yer wants rest, if ever mortal did, and yer'd much better stay quiet—now, do 'ee, sir, another day or two."

"I can't stay quiet—I can't rest. No, I'll go."

Better for him had he taken Judith's advice; but he was obstinate and would not. The bracing air of the hills and the healthy tonics administered by little Jim had made a new man of him, and when he was fairly on the road he congratulated himself upon the step he had taken. Lucy was with a party, but perhaps she had left it to ride on when she received his telegram, and she must have received it days ago. It was no distance to travel, alone even, and she had plenty of servants with her. Perhaps she had induced one of the party, or even the whole of it, to hurry forward with her, but he hoped she was alone. She would surely be alone. Any bend in the road might bring them face to face, any moment they might meet—and what a scene

for their meeting ! Nothing was wanting to complete its romance. But the day was advancing, and as yet they had not met.

Late in the evening he reached the end of the first stage. She was not at the dâk-bungalow, as he had hoped she might be ; but news of her was : Judith's messenger (one of his old syces) greeted him with a salaam and the intelligence that he had left the mem-sahib some twenty miles further on the day before.

In case of a contingency such as this, Vraille had brought with him a light equipment in a saddle-bag ; and so he spent the night alone at the dâk-bungalow just as drearily as he would have done had he remained at home another day—and far more uncomfortably. However, it was the last of his solitude, and early the next morning he started off, his hopes higher, and his heart lighter, than they had been since his return.

But as he rode on and on his hopes sank, his heart became heavier, with each succeeding mile. The stage was a short one, usually coupled with the last by the homeward bound. By starting moderately early she could easily have reached home in the one day ; and yet they had not met. What could have happened to detain her ?

Pressing his pony forward as quickly as possible, with his anxiety increasing every minute, he reached the next dâk-bungalow sooner than he expected. Not a sign of her.

He flung himself off his pony and questioned the khansamah waiting in the doorway to receive him in a way that made that worthy Mahometan press his hands together before his face and call Vraille " Defender

of the poor" and "Father of the afflicted" a dozen times before being able to find any more sensible remark to make.

He answered at last. The sahib people were his patrons; they had slept and breakfasted under his humble roof; they had given the order for tiffin; they were eating the air among the mountains.

Vraille uttered a curse and strode away.

He searched through glen and dale and nook, high and low, on this side and on that; he clambered up one path and down another, he wandered along the banks of an enticing stream, he pushed aside the branches of a delightful wood, and stopped. Voices, though he could see nothing. Three strides further on and he reached the brow of a leafy hill, and looked down, only for a second or two. But in that second or two he had seen and heard enough.

"You damned villain!"

Mr. Herbert Rook picked himself up and rushed at his assailant, only to fall a second time with the blood streaming from his mouth.

James Vraille, with heaving breast and the eyes of a madman, turned to his wife, and in a short, quick breath told her to go on before him to the house.

And so, at last, they met.

* * * *

"The ten minutes are up. Your jampan has gone on. Your horse is waiting. Come."

"B-ut—b-ut—I—haven't—packed," sobbed Lucy.

"Packed! Do you think I intend to wait while you *pack—now*. Come."

"But I must——"

"Come, I say," thundered Vraille ferociously. "I will not speak again."

She was frightened into submission, too frightened to speak another word. In five minutes more she was in the saddle riding beside a sullen, silent brute of a man. For a time her sobs were the only sounds that broke the silence; but even they ceased at last, and still he did not speak. Mile after mile of this continued wretchedness, unbroken by a single word, and then a halt.

"You will lunch here, and then go on in your jampan," he said, slinging himself awkwardly out of his saddle, and coming to her side to help her to dismount.

"Jim," she exclaimed, looking down at him, "you look positively horrible. Oh, why did you come poking and prying about?"

"Ah! why indeed! But we have no time to waste. Dismount, please. Go in, now, and eat. I will wait here."

In less than half an hour they were on the road again, with their changes of conversation considerably reduced. Rarely was the road wide enough to admit of the jampan and the pony travelling side by side, and in such places where it was, Vraille took no advantage of the opportunity, but kept behind. A long, wretched, silent journey. The day waned, the sun sank, the darkness of night enveloped them; and when they had reached the Mall at last, Lucy turned and asked him suddenly if he were dumb.

He made no answer, but brought his pony alongside her jampan.

"Have you nothing to say?" she asked.

"Nothing yet," he answered.

And so they reached their home. Lucy hurried into the house, and Jim, calling a couple of her jampanees to help him, scrambled out of the saddle on to the ground as best he could. His legs were cramped and stiff; the three stages had been more than enough to overtax his strength. When the natives had disappeared in the darkness, he followed his wife into the house, and, making his way to the drawing-room, dropped into a chair.

"Now," said Lucy, "perhaps you will have the kindness to speak."

"To-morrow," he said.

"No, now! I have had time to think. You have created an awful scandal. What are you going to do?"

"I'll tell you that to-morrow. I do not wish to say anything now—I am not fit."

"Oh, you are beginning to repent a little! I thought you would. When all is said and done you have made a mountain out of a mole-hill, and you had no right to go and strike a man in that cowardly——"

"Silence!" cried Vraille, springing to his feet. "I will not listen to you. That word might have stung me once, but I care nothing for it now. Go to your room and leave me, before I say anything more. Lucy—" and he caught her by the wrist as she was about to answer—"if you have one grain of sense in all your despicable folly, leave me now, and don't say another word to me to-night. Go!"

She shrank back from him; his face twitched, his eyes glared, his hand hurt her wrist. She had always

dreaded his return, but she had never expected to meet a madman whose presence filled her with terror and repulsion, as his did now. Readily she hurried from the room, and sent for Judith to attend to her wants.

But Judith before answering her summons came into the drawing-room. She walked up to the man lying rather than sitting in the arm-chair by the fireplace, and, touching him softly on the arm, whispered, "Is there anything I can bring you, sir?"

He neither looked at her nor moved, but answered roughly, "Yes, fetch me a brandy and soda."

Judith, whose wooden face rarely expressed emotion, looked surprised; but she did as he bade her, and, placing a small table beside him, set the glass upon it. He raised it to his lips, drained it to the last drop, and set it down again.

"Just tell your mistress," he said, getting up and stretching his arms wearily, "that I am going straight to bed, as I am tired."

He was indeed tired—so tired that a long night's rest would have done him all the good in the world, as the saying is, and yet so tired that he could not sleep. His limbs ached and his skin was hot; he thought that perhaps a return of the fever was keeping him awake, especially as that old sensation of being a log of wood was creeping over him. But he was so tired that, in spite of will and sense of imperative duty, his hands refused to do their office and roll his body over—so tired that his mind could not fix itself upon the work, but wandered away to other things. Some one was breathing in the room; he could hear the noise faintly in a far-off corner; but it came nearer and nearer,

louder and louder, until the harsh, stertorous gasps were in his very ear, and the breath upon his cheek. With an effort he moved, and the sound ceased. The movement called his attention to his hands and feet; they were swelling, swelling to a gigantic size, and so rapidly increasing in weight that they felt like leaden cannon-balls; and everything they touched was huge in proportion; the threads in the sheets were ropes, the blankets iron weights, the wool upon them bayonets. He was being crushed and suffocated, and he started up, flinging off the bed-clothes.

"Oh, this will never do," he cried, jumping out of bed and pulling aside the window-blind.

It was early morning, and a pearly grey mist hung over the mountains.

"She is only foolish, only vain and frivolous, and her vanity and folly have been played upon by that black-guard. But there is an end of all trust and confidence—the better parts of love. I wonder if she is asleep."

He threw a dressing-gown over his shoulders, and crept—like a thief, as he had said to Judith—through the silent house and into his wife's room. She was asleep—peacefully asleep.

"Ah! beautiful—too beautiful to be anything but good. Yet, Lucy, I wish you were not beautiful. Would that your face were plain, ugly even! But it is lovely, very lovely! No, I will not kiss it."

He stole back to his bed again, and slept.

The khansamah salaamed low to his master as he entered the breakfast-room. The sahib was rested? His health good? The mem-sahib was breakfasting in her own room; her excellency was probably fatigued.

Would the sahib drink tea, or would he prefer coffee? Both were at his excellency's disposal.

The man was Vraille's old retainer; the unctuous words were familiar; the scene might have been enacted in the handsome bungalow of those gay times of prosperity in the plains. The comfortable little room, the one chair set at the table, the one place laid, were all the same as when Judith had brought him the poached eggs on the night of his return home. But it was not even yesterday. It was to-day.

A pile of letters lay beside his plate. He read them as he ate, but they seemed to spoil his appetite somewhat. He went on reading them as he sat in the verandah afterwards, smoking his pipe; and as he was picking them up one by one from his lap, running his eye over them for the twentieth time, and putting them back in their envelopes, a pair of pattering feet on the board flooring attracted his attention, and a shy little voice said "Daddee?" with a question in it.

"Judith, are you there?"

"Yes, sir," and she appeared from behind the house-corner.

"Take him away, Judith; take him away. I can't play with him this morning."

The child did not recognise the voice; it was that of a strange man, so he toddled back to Judith as fast as his legs would carry him, and clung to the skirts of her dress.

He watched them go, and sent no kind word after them; but, thrusting his letters into his pocket, muttered to himself: "I'm not fit to go near him. Now—yes, as well now as later."

"Lucy," he said, tapping at her door.

"Well, what is it?"

"May I come in?"

"Yes, if you like."

He turned the handle and went in. He had done better had he remained outside. But James Vraille, who proverbially said the wrong thing at the wrong time, with nothing but his convictions to help him, blundered on, and was bound to make as many mistakes as were possible under the circumstances. Such men deserve, of course, to go to the wall—and they usually do.

He found her lying comfortably propped up with pillows on a sofa, and beside her was a small table, on which was laid out a pretty little breakfast service. Apparently she was in an advanced stage of toilet, for her hair was dressed as if for the day, and she wore an exceedingly becoming morning robe with ruffles of lace about the neck. Never had Jim seen her look more beautiful than she did then.

She set down her coffee-cup as he advanced and stared at him.

"I have come to have a talk with you, Lucy," he said, seating himself beside the table.

"Oh, I thought you were not going to talk to me any more. Well, go on." Instinct told her that he had come to her with submission. Now was *her* opportunity; he had frightened her nearly out of her senses the night before, but he had calmed down considerably, and she would make him repent his brutality.

"It is difficult to know how to begin if you meet

me like that, Lucy; but what I wish to say is, that I have come to you with my forgiveness if you will but express one little word of regret."

He paused, but she made no reply.

"Say you were carried away for the moment, and confess to me everything that went before—just to reassure me. Say your vanity succumbed to that cad's flattery—say that there is no real harm done—say that what happened yesterday was only the folly of an impulse—that you regret it—that we can begin life anew from to-day—say you are sorry—say anything——"

He was getting more excited as he went along. Why should she say any of these things? He had pried upon her. He had spoilt her pleasure, and broken up her happiness; and beside——

"But for Heaven's sake say something!" he burst out.

"How rude you are!"

"Very likely. I don't know. I did not come here to see you drink tea and eat toast. I did not expect to find you silent."

"You would not speak to me yesterday."

"I had nothing to say. You ought to have much; and your reply to me should require no consideration. Tell me, now, Lucy, that you are sorry for your share in this wretched business, and I will take you about with me among these people and laugh at them instead of allowing them to laugh at—at—us."

Laugh at them! She, the idol of them all, to be "taken about" among them, and by a man who was a scarecrow—a man whose name by this time was upon every one's lips as a sort of brawler.

"What you say is simply preposterous," she said. "I don't want to be *taken about*, and, though I have done what you seem to think is very dreadful, it is your own fault. You leave me, you neglect me, you don't try to understand me, and are surprised if other men admire me more than you do. At any rate, I have not made a show of myself as you have. Are you not sorry for your share?" She had made him angry at last.

"Yes, I am; I am sorry I did not cut his face in ribbons with my whip, instead of hitting with my hand, as if he were a gentleman."

"Jim, you are a perfect brute."

But she had not calculated on raising his anger to such a pitch, and she began to feel sorry she had spoken.

"I think I am," he thundered, bringing his fist down on the table and making the crockery rattle. "I think you are making a brute of me. Listen! I stayed awake last night trying to make up my mind to forgive you. I felt I could, if I had anything—anything to look forward to in the future. What is the good of success to me now! I am promoted. I am ordered home."

"Are you? Where to? Oh, I don't want to go home."

"You must, whether you like it or not; and I can remember the time when you did not want to come to India. I did my best to give you your wish then; you must comply with mine this time. We are going to a very small station—right out of the world, where you will be perfectly quiet. Don't look disappointed

like that; it is the best thing that could happen to you. You have a scandal to live down."

"But, Jim, I did not create it."

"Did you not? Well, I did, if you like; but all I have to say is, that for my part, if the same thing were to happen to-morrow, I would do the same again—and more. But it has been enough. We shall not see his damned handsome face again—nor will any one else for some time to come, I fancy. In a few weeks we shall be quit of the whole country; and I thought—I did think that I should be able to win back your old love for me when we were quite alone together. But I doubt now if you ever did love me. I suppose it would only be adding to my—my usual good luck to inquire—but did you?"

"I don't know—I don't think so. Do not look at me like that. You have often behaved so badly to me; we never had an idea in common—and, Jim, you *know* you never did appreciate me."

"No, I did not. I do now, though. I know now that it is perfectly useless to appeal to your heart or your sense—you have none of either. But listen to me, Lucy! Before I die I will, at least, command your respect."

She began to cry a little. Would he never go. He frightened her terribly.

"And when you know more," he went on, "you will have no occasion to be ashamed of your husband."

"But that is just it. How can I ever look Mrs. Lovejoy in the face again? How can I go out? How can I live cooped up in a miserable little hole at home?"

“That will do,” he said passionately, rising to his feet and standing over her. “I have heard enough. Before I married you I told you that if you felt you did not love me, I would leave you then and there. You chose to marry me. I have had misfortunes since: they were none of my own making, but you throw them in my teeth. I cannot make you love me, you say. I doubt if it is your nature to love any one—even your child. There was a time when this thought would have well-nigh killed me. I am harder now; I have seen more of the world. And there was a time when your tears would have melted me: they are freezing my very heart up now—they are not shed for me, or for the wrong you have done me—they are shed for yourself.”

Lucy buried her face in the sofa-cushions and turned her back upon him; but she left off crying.

“And perhaps,” he continued, “I care more now for my own honour than I do for your love. That I cannot force; but I *can*—and I *will*—make you do your duty. I have seen plenty of horrors since I’ve been away—but nothing so horrible as my own home, now that I have come back. Look at these bills! If you had expressed one single word of regret I would not have shown them to you. Look at them, I say. Do you want to ruin me? They are yours, sent to me to settle. There are more of them, probably, and how am I to pay them? I shall know all that by to-morrow. But what do I know now? When I take you home with me, I shall take you with the knowledge that you are not to be trusted in anything—that you have deceived me over and over again, and are not sorry.”

The torrent of words ceased, and so silently did he stand there beside her, biting his lip and twisting up the papers in his hands, that, after a long pause, Lucy turned her head, but instantly buried it in the cushions again and shrank up closer to the wall.

"No, I am not gone yet," he said in a calm low voice, bereft of every semblance of its former ferocity. "I am waiting still."

Again there was a long pause, and again it was he that broke it: "Very well, then; I am going now. I am going to the club—I shall lunch there. I will walk about this smiling Hell" (he spoke quite calmly) "and meet people. I shall make a point of meeting them and of speaking to them. I am not afraid; I have done nothing to be asha——"

He stopped very suddenly. There was an awkward choke in his voice; he would just wait until it was gone and he could speak clearly again. It took a long time to go. Once he made a half movement toward the sofa, but checked it, and, after passing his hand quickly across his face, for the last time broke the silence.

"Then, for the present, good-bye; and may God forgive you all the misery you have caused."

Even at the door he turned and looked back; but she had not moved.

And so, at last, they parted.

The pony was soon saddled, and Vraille led him up the hill to the Mall, where he mounted and rode off. He understood, as he paid numerous calls in the Bazaar, why the tailor had been so anxious to send in his account to himself instead of to Lucy. His eyes ached

and his brain throbbed; he could scarcely read the figures that were put before him; but he understood that they were large enough to necessitate an expensive telegram to Uncle Ben. He named a round sum; but, large as that sum was, he felt he would have given a far larger, did he possess it, to sit down and rest.

"I am nearly beat," he said as he held on to the pommel of the saddle while his pony climbed the hill to the club. I can understand what old Dare felt like that night. But a good luncheon and a bottle of champagne will pull me together."

He was right. In an hour he was so jocular and merry, so communicative and sociable, that his friends, who had at first seemed rather to avoid him, gathered round him, listened to his jokes, and laughed. There was not a sad face among them; they congratulated him on his good luck up at the front; they even made flattering remarks about distinguished service and brevet rank; they discussed things military from many points of view—but they one and all avoided social topics.

He spent his afternoon in this idle, gossiping way, and returned home in time for dinner. But he might as well have spared himself the trouble of returning at all—and additional trouble meant additional fatigue. One place only was laid on the dinner-table, one chair only drawn up to it, one person only was expected by the dignified khansamah. Lucy had left word that she was spending the evening with Mrs. Palmira.

She was avoiding him still. Well, it mattered little

now. Mrs. Palmira, with all her love of society, was a shrewd woman, and one not likely to run the risk of having her own reputation cast into the shade of any cloud that might overshadow that of even a dear friend. Lucy was in safe hands, and, on the whole, it was as well that it should be as it was. But a long evening was before him yet. In the dining-room there was that one plate, in the drawing-room those numerous smiling photographs; anything was better than solitude. He had a suit of dress-clothes somewhere, he would dine at the club.

There was a burlesque at the theatre that night and after dinner the club smoking-room was rather deserted. He knew that Mrs. Palmira would not take Lucy, but he said that he did not care for burlesques, and had not engaged a seat. A rubber of whist engaged his attention until his third revoke, when his partner remarked that he had much better go to bed, as he was looking like death.

He took his partner's advice, but he had difficulty in taking it; the road was long, the night pitch dark, the lantern, bobbing up and down in the syce's hand, of very little use, the effort of keeping himself in the saddle almost beyond his strength.

He could hear her come in just as well from his own room as from the drawing-room, and in his own room he could lie down. He lay back upon his bed while his bearer drew off his boots—that was a relief. Help? No; he wanted no help, the bearer could go. He could not be bothered to undress—beside, he was a watcher; he was waiting up for some one. Oh, how his bones ached, and his head throbbed! How utterly,

utterly done up he felt that was not to be wondered at no, not to be wondered at, considering all things the pillow was cool and soft the sensation of lying down pleasant delicious it was a pity he was obliged to keep awake the night was so still the house so

He fell into a deep, deep sleep. Worn out in mind and body, he lay like the log he had so often imagined himself to be, and slept on and on without a movement—on and on, right through the night—on, far on into the next day. And no one cared, or dared, to wake him; it was not worth while.

In the morning the khansamah's familiar words of greeting were missing. But the one chair was there, the one place laid, and beside it another pile of letters.

It was while he sat with one of them open in his hand, looking straight before him, with a blank expression of utter helplessness in his face, that Judith peeped into the room. He did not see her, he did not move, and she crept away. In half an hour's time she came again; he had moved only to rest his elbow on the table and his head in his hand, and this time she stole into the room.

"Master," she said, "is there anything I can do?"

He looked up.

"I drove her from the house—I- U! I thought she was with Mrs. Palmira—I did indeed. But you know more than I, perhaps, and you may as well know as much. Read—read what she says."

But he did not wait for her to read.

"All along the road home, Judith—all the time I've

been here—even yesterday—people talked to me of nothing but honour, honour, honour!”—and he laughed—a loud, ringing laugh; but it was less pleasant to hear than the cry with which he killed the Afghan.

It was the death-knell of his love.

PART II.

“So it seems to our eyes ; but the eyes of children are anointed with a divine clay. And our eyes were so anointed long ago ; but either time has rubbed off the precious unguent, or we have washed it off ourselves with careless hands.”

D'ARCY THOMPSON.

“It is beautiful, but not the most beautiful. There is another life, hard, rough and thorny, trodden with bleeding feet and aching brow : the life of which the cross is the symbol : a battle which no peace follows, this side the grave ; which the grave gapes to finish before the victory is won ; and—strange that it should be so—this is the highest life of man.”

FROUDE.

“Thus, like a God-created, fire-breathing spirit-host, we emerge from the inane ; haste stormfully across the astonished earth, then plunge again into the inane. Earth's mountains are levelled and her seas filled up in our passage. Can the earth, which is but dead and a vision, resist spirits which have reality and are alive ? On the hardest adamant some foot-print of us is stamped in ; the last rear of the host will read traces of the earliest van. But whence ? Oh heaven ! whither ? Sense knows not ; faith knows not ; only that it through mystery to mystery, from God to God.”

CARLYLE.

PART II.



CHAPTER I.

THREE GENERATIONS.

PICCADILLY had on its old yellow-and-brown winter suit, and looked so dowdy and dismal that the heavens were half inclined to cry over it, which would only have made matters worse. The road was muddy, the pavement greasy, everything and everybody damp. The fog was not so dense as to necessitate the supplementing of daylight with gaslight in order to see, but thick enough to make driving difficult, cabmen swear and policemen pretty busy.

The hoarse voices of itinerant vendors were huskier than ever that raw, unwholesome morning. People ran up against one another, and opened their mouths to apologise—if they did so at all—grudgingly, for fear of admitting the fog. The weather was not conducive to civility; and a tall man in an ulster, who strode along eastward with bent head and frowning brow, was no more polite than his neighbours. He was evidently a gentleman, but, quite as evidently, one who did not study personal appearances too minutely.

He reached the Burlington Arcade, up which he

turned. In one of the shop-windows an assortment of photographs of "professional" celebrities had attracted the attention of a small crowd, and he, too, stopped to look.

"Very beautiful, no doubt," he said, and hurried on, for his remark had diverted the general gaze from the window to himself.

He did not stop again until he reached the Albany. Mr. Vraille was at home, and Major Vraille was admitted.

"Well, Jim, my boy, how are ye this beastly morning?" boomed Uncle Ben's voice. "Looking a little better than when you first came up, eh? London done you good?—that's right. Sit down, boy, sit down, and let's have a chat."

Flinging off his coat, Vraille drew an arm-chair up to the fire. Changed as he was, his time-honoured designation remained the same. He was now in no sense a boy; his boyhood had left none of its boyishness behind, and, in spite of his short grey hair, he was far from approaching the "old boy" period of life. He looked sallow and thin, but he was "right as a trivet," he said, "and as strong as a horse again." Then he asked after the old gentleman's health.

Now Uncle Ben was actually an old boy—an old boy whose life's labour was over, whose rest had come in the shape of Albany Chambers and nothing to do. The office had been closed, not so much because the old lawyer had wearied of law, as on account of the law wearying of him.

"A good bit better than I have been," he said, "and there's not much the matter with me now, except the incurable complaint. Fogs don't suit my time of life,

that's all. But what," he asked, heartily enough, "have you been doing with yourself lately?"

"As much as most men in any given fortnight. I've seen everything said to be worth seeing in London—nearly all the theatres, and most of the music-halls; but farces are not so funny as they used to be, I think, and there seems to be more vulgarity and less wit about the popular songs of the day than ever."

"Perhaps so," said Uncle Ben; "I don't know. Anything else?"

"Oh, yes; I've dined out, lunched out, and supped out; I've been to an 'at home' or two, and if you throw in three or four concerts, a few picture-galleries and an oratorio, you have the lot."

"I'm glad you've been enjoying yourself," said Uncle Ben, slowly, as he offered his nephew a cigar.

"I did not say that. You asked me what I had been doing. The time that I haven't spent with you has been spent as I say. Enjoyment! I've lost my capacity for enjoyment, I think. These things used to amuse me once—no, they never did! I was a fool to suppose they would now. You see, this place, St. Dogwells, where I am quartered, is a wretched place. I have read of the 'dull apathy and sordid pettishness' of small country towns, and that about describes St. Dogwells. It is worse than deadly—it is deadly-lively; the Dogwellites won't let me alone. I came to London to enjoy myself but it has been a failure. In spite of the loneliness of Fort Gaunt, I'd sooner spend my evenings night after night in my barrack-room alone, than spend them at the Slasher with the crew I met there yesterday. It seems a ridiculous thing to say,

but sometimes I think I'd like to leave the service altogether and travel."

The old man looked attentively at his nephew for some time without speaking, and then said—

"Light your cigar, my boy."

Vraille lighted his cigar, and when he had puffed it into a glow, continued—

"The spirit of unrest is upon me. When I'm at St. Dogwells I want to be in London, when I'm in London I want to go back. I'm naturally restless, I suppose. When I was in England I wished to be in India. Although I looked forward to coming home like anything, I think now I would go out again if I had the chance. We never know when we are well off, do we?"

"Jim," said Uncle Ben, solemnly, taking his cigar from his mouth and waving it up and down impressively, "you are talking nonsense. Remember the old motto: 'Know thyself.' There never was a Vraille who did more credit to that motto than you did—up to a few months ago. Are you going to undo all you have done? No; you can't do that. But I am sorry, boy, to hear you talk like this; all the more sorry because I know what you are made of, and that in the past you lived to prove——"

"I lived to see a paper thrust before a dying man, and a pen put into his hand too late! It was all vague and dreamy; I was too sick to know properly what was going on; but I remember thinking 't would make her proud of me: Dr. Dick told me all about it afterwards, for I believe I was a bit off my head. Dare was sane enough, but he had put off signing that

paper from day to day, saying he would see to it when he got well. He put it off too long; he died before he could write his name. My recommendation never got beyond the hospital walls. What did she care?"

"But every one knew of it."

"Not every one—only a few. It was all represented afterwards; Dick took the matter up and pushed it forward. I had a letter from him this morning, saying it was hopelessly blocked—not that it matters much now."

"But the honour is the same, Jim; the honour is the same."

"Honour!" he cried, springing to his feet and flinging out his arm as if he were going to deliver a speech upon the subject;—"don't talk to me of honour, uncle." There he stopped, and, seating himself again, said quite quietly, "But it's a poor thing—easily won, easily lost; and not worth getting excited about."

Then the lawyer, rather than the uncle, argued with him. He took the thing to heart altogether too absurdly; his case was common enough; he was to be congratulated on getting so well out of a bad bargain. All that remained to be done was to take the necessary steps to rid himself of a worse than useless encumbrance, and forget the past as soon as possible.

Jim sighed. That was such an easy thing to say—such an impossible thing to do. It seemed to him that in the future he would live in the past. He was lonely; and although he knew that he had always been lonely—forced back into himself—he regretted the past, and wished, not that it could be again, but that it were not irretrievably gone. It is so hard to leave behind

any defined period of time—so hard to pass the milestones of life. No state of being is changed for another state without some regrets.

“All you say is true, uncle,” he said; “the past lies behind me, a wreck; the future is before me, but it is empty. There is the pity of it. Ah! for the boy’s sake, if not for mine, I wonder she did not stop to think. But I believe now she never cared a rap more for him than she did for me. No woman could care for me, perhaps—I am not that sort of man, most likely—but I thought all women loved their children. Uncle Ben,” he said with impressive earnestness, “I married one that didn’t.”

The lawyer did not seem particularly surprised at this revelation; but, after looking at his nephew for some time, with a light of admiration gradually kindling in his eyes, suddenly burst out with—

“Jim, you married a fool.”

“It is curious,” said Vraille, simply, “that before our marriage I should have told her that folly worked an infinity of mischief in the world. There is that man; she has done him as much harm almost as she has done me, if that were any consolation, which it isn’t. He had no idea she was going to join him, I verily believe; but as she claimed his protection, he, from some sense of *honour* which I do not pretend to understand, gave it to her; he lost a very desirable appointment in consequence, and his career is practically ruined. When I got her letter—that first day, you know—I wanted to go after her, indeed I did. She said I had driven her from me, and that she had gone to some one who was always kind. Oh! I thought

I could pardon her folly; but when Judith showed me I was bent on a fool's errand, when she had told me more—much more that I did not know till then—I knew that it would be useless, and—and I could not go. It is as well, perhaps, I did not. There is no knowing how it might have ended; but, anyway, the indignity, the disgrace, without a shadow of hope beyond, was more than I could bear. She had deceived and tricked me to the last; and if she was ever fond of any human being beside herself—which I doubt—she was fond of that man. She never was of me—never!”

“And in the meantime, remember you are tied to her.”

“She shall have her freedom; but what is the good of freedom to me? My life is broken up—wasted.”

“Jim, my boy,” said the old gentleman in an altered tone, getting up out of his chair and laying his hand on the other's shoulder, “I am very sorry for you.”

“I can't bear kindness,” said Jim, sinking his head into his hands; “speak to me as you were speaking just this minute—quietly and coolly—and I can tell you anything you want to know. But don't be kind, if you wish me to talk sensibly.” He raised his head and dropped his hands. “I can read or hear,” he said, “of children starving unmoved and without seeming to care a rush; but when I am told that some one has brought them bread at last, that is what I cannot stand; that sort of thing, I mean. It is easier to bear harshness and cruelty and coldness than a kind word. Kindness finds out weakness. One kind word from Lucy—only one—would have gained my

whole forgiveness. It never came. Go back and sit down again, Uncle Ben; be as you were before. I want to get hard and cold like the rest of the world—as a man should be. Don't remind me of what I know *you* are; don't be kind."

"Poor old Jim!" said Uncle Ben. "Time will be kinder to you, boy, than ever I could hope to be."

He walked away then to the other side of the room, and stood with his back to Jim, looking out of the window. The view was limited to a few square yards of bricks and mortar; but little as there was to be seen, he probably saw less: for he stood there with vacant eyes, tapping one of his waistcoat buttons with the gold rim of his *pince-nez*, and softly hissing rather than whistling a little tune with his lips. Presently he left off hissing, and fixing his *pince-nez* securely in position, craned his head down sideways against the window-pane, and looked up open-mouthed at the sky. The fog appeared to be lifting, and a certain brightness in the heavy atmosphere seemed to hint that the afternoon would not be altogether so dismal as the morning had been.

"I believe it's going to clear," he said, turning round and, wriggling his nose free of the spring of his glasses, which he caught deftly in his hand as they fell. "Have you anything particular to do?"

"No, nothing particular," said Jim, who with his hands in his pockets, his legs stretched out, his chin on his chest, sat looking at the fire; then, rousing up—"only to see the boy this afternoon. I go back to St. Dogwells to-morrow, you know."

"Well, what do you say to a bottle of claret at the

Club? Then, if you like, we can go and see the boy together afterwards."

To this arrangement Jim willingly assented; and when he had helped the old gentleman to struggle into a heavy fur-lined coat, they were almost ready to start.

"Oh, by the way," he exclaimed, "there is a letter for you, Jim. It was sent on here yesterday from the office. I put it on the table to give you when you came, and precious near forgot it. However, here it is."

Vraille took the letter and looked at it listlessly. The envelope was large and square, the paper thick, the handwriting unknown to him; it was probably an offer to lend him money to any extent on the shortest notice and easiest terms. He received many such; and as his uncle's office had been his business address while in India, he was neither interested nor surprised. Uncle Ben was waiting with his hand on the door, so, putting the letter in his pocket, he followed him into the street, and by the time they had reached the staid old club, of which Mr. Vraille was a respected member, had forgotten it altogether.

"I have been thinking," said Uncle Ben, sipping his claret and smacking his lips between each sip, "that in your place I should be inclined to take that boy with me to St. Dogwells. Why don't you? He'd be a companion."

"Well, I have thought of it sometimes," said Jim; "but then—~~oh~~, I don't know; it would be a curious sort of anomaly, wouldn't it—a man of my age with a baby and no wife in a place like that? No one down there has the least idea I am married. I am a sort of

fraud, you see; I can't give out I am a widower, I can't say I am anything, and I thought I'd wait and let—let newspaper correspondents answer awkward questions for me first."

"Mrs. Flight does not care about children, Jim, and you can't expect to leave him there for ever."

"No," said Jim, thoughtfully, "and it was awfully good of her to take him at all. 'Pon my word," he continued with a curious smile, the first indication of amusement his face had shown that day, "it would be rather fun to take him to St. Dogwells. Lord, how they would cackle and jaw!"

"But apart from that, I thought you were fond of the boy."

"So I was, uncle; so I was—so I am now, but gall has been mixed with everything that used to be sweet and wholesome; it has poisoned all my thoughts and feelings. When I go to Cabstand Square, there is the dreary remembrance of what Cabstand Square used to be; when I see the boy, I think of all that might have been, and is not, and never can be now. Oh! I detest Cabstand Square, and, kind as Mrs. Flight always is to me, I hate going there. The boy will soon forget me altogether."

The good understanding which had existed between father and son in those past Simla days had been rudely broken, and for weeks afterwards Jim had scarcely seen his child. On the voyage home, his opportunities of improving their acquaintance had not been numerous, and shortly after landing, he had been ordered to Fort Gaunt, St. Dogwells. So that circumstances had rather tended to estrange big and little

Jim. The situation now was awkward; Mrs. Flight had expressed a strong desire to make some reparation for the injury she said she had done him in allowing him to marry her daughter, whom she declared, in somewhat forcible terms, she would never see again, and had insisted on Judith and little Jim making Cabstand Square their home until her son-in-law was settled. Vraile had no option but to comply, and the matter once arranged, Mrs. Flight requested that Lucy's name might never again be mentioned in her hearing. His occasional visits to Cabstand Square were, consequently, rendered somewhat perfunctory, and his interviews with Mrs. Flight constrained. Whenever he could he avoided her altogether, and confined his attentions to Judith and little Jim. The Irish Question, Free Trade, Universal Franchise, and such like matters, did not interest him much just then; and he knew that, although Mrs. Flight was civility itself, she cared more for a pungent diatribe on Mr. Gladstone's latest transgression than for all the babies in the world. It was Judith Foresight whom he went to see, for little Jim's welfare, he felt pretty certain, was left almost entirely in her hands. But not so altogether; for Uncle Ben had volunteered, with much show of importance, to take upon himself the responsibilities of general supervision in his nephew's absence. And so thoroughly had the old gentleman entered into the spirit of this duty, so serious had he considered his obligations, that he had never allowed more than a couple of days to pass without making a personal inspection of little Jim's nursery. On the few occasions when he had failed in this respect, confined to

his bed by the doctor's orders, he had invariably sent his man-servant with messages for Judith and paper bags for little Jim. These messages were just as useless as his visits, for he no more thought of giving directions than of finding fault, but they answered his purpose—whatever that was.

"Do you mind, uncle," Jim asked as they descended the Club steps, "coming round by the Lowther Arcade? It is not much out of our way."

The old gentleman exploded.

"Bless you," he exclaimed, "I *always* go that way!"

So they proceeded to the Lowther Arcade, and there looked at the toys displayed on all sides, without either of them in the least knowing how to set about to choose—where choice was unlimited—what, out of so much, the boy would like best.

Uncle Ben, after a heated discussion with a young lady who wanted to force an air-gun upon him in spite of his objections to its danger, left her shop in dudgeon without buying anything, and repaired to another, which, as the proprietor remarked, he turned inside out before finally settling on a box of tin soldiers and a clock-work engine.

"All boys," he said to Jim, "like soldiers and engines."

"But don't you think," objected Vraille, "that he is rather too young to appreciate an engine? What do you say to this?" He touched a spring on the side of a square box he held in his hand. The lid opened, and the infuriated countenance of an aged man appeared with a squeak. Jim laughed.

"That!" cried Uncle Ben, indignantly. "I say it is enough to frighten any child into a fit."

"Perhaps you're right," said Jim, meekly putting down the jack-in-the-box, and, to appease the disappointed shopman, buying instead a dozen marbles.

"Well," exclaimed Uncle Ben, as the marbles and their monetary equivalent changed hands, "you know less about this job than I do; engines come before marbles, anyway. I'll have that engine now, in spite of what you say."

So Uncle Ben made his purchase, and after rejecting a pair of skates, which the shopman said would come in handy if there was a frost, they moved off, discussing the possibilities of stabling a rocking-horse in little Jim's nursery.

"I have it!" cried Jim, suddenly, when they had almost agreed to abandon the rocking-horse idea. "He was always fond of animals; a Noah's Ark is the very thing."

"Won't he suck the paint off?" asked Uncle Ben with some anxiety.

"Humph!" said Jim, with a slowness due partly to doubt, partly to disappointment, "I did not think of that. But surely," he added, brightening up, "surely there must be such a thing as an unpainted Ark."

Uncle Ben was uncertain, and after making one or two inquiries without success, they agreed to take opposite sides of the Arcade and search independently for an unpainted Ark, inhabited by a similarly achromatic Noah and menagerie—the finder to be the possessor.

This arrangement answered excellently. Each was

free to make any intermediate purchases he thought advisable without being subjected to adverse criticism from the other; and the two gentlemen met together at the end of the Arcade looking rather like a couple of animated Christmas-trees.

The unpainted Ark, which Jim had been lucky enough to secure, when wrapped in brown paper, made a rather formidable parcel. As the simplest method of carrying it, Major Vraille tied it to his stick, adjusting it so that it would balance a wooden horse at the other end.

"I think that's all," he said, straightening his back when his arrangements were completed.

The two men looked at one another and simultaneously burst out laughing.

"Uncle, what a generous old fellow you are!"

"What a fool you do look, Jim; come on!"

A four-wheeler took them to Cabstand Square. Mrs. Flight, they discovered, was not at home, so they requested the girl who opened the door to them to inform Mrs. Foresight of their arrival, ascended three flights of stairs, deposited their parcels in the little front room apportioned exclusively to Master Vraille as a sitting-room, and awaited the course of events. They had not long to wait.

"All right," came Mrs. Foresight's voice, sharp and clear, from the adjoining room, "sha'n't be a minute. Say he's ready all but his 'air."

The girl said nothing of the sort—there was no need—but before her footfall was out of hearing, Judith appeared with little Jim in her arms.

She set him on the floor.

"Now, make your bow like a little gentleman," she said.

The little figure (quite two feet of it now) bent forward and down until the little hands touched the toes of a pair of tiny shoes, and a small voice, rendered husky by intervening linen, said—

"Mornin', daddee!"

"Bravo!" shouted Uncle Ben.

"There's a good boy," said Vraille.

"Yes, but get up again," said Judith.

But Master Jim's fingers, once brought into the near proximity of brand-new red shoes, could not be so easily recalled; they wandered over the shiny leather and plucked at the confining buttons as if desirous of unfastening them.

"No, no," said Judith, "stand up again, like a man. He allus does spoil his tricks afore company," she added regretfully.

He stood up straight with a jerk, and holding out one foot to his visitors, said—

"Noo 'oos, 'ook! Boy got noo——" staggered, and fell with a sudden flop into a sitting position. "Boy cummle down 'gain," he explained, with a look of mingled astonishment and distress on his upturned face.

"So you did. Well, never mind, old chap," cried Jim, picking him up in his arms. "Come and see what Uncle Ben has brought."

Uncle Ben, meanwhile, had unpacked a drum, and was playing it and a penny whistle with as much earnestness as any Punch-and-Judy showman.

"'Ant it t'umpet," said the boy, holding out his arms.

"He will put in them *its*," Judith explained apologetically as Uncle Ben handed the boy the musical instrument which his childish credulity believed to be a trumpet.

After a few shrill blasts, he dropped the whistle unceremoniously, and, struggling violently in Jim's arms, excitedly remarked, "'Ant it d'um, 'ant it d'um?"

Then Vraille set the boy down on the floor beside the drum, and picking up the penny whistle, played a dismal and dolorous tune to his son's accompaniment, while Uncle Ben, not to be outdone, produced a rattle, which he swung round and round as well as his boisterous laughter would allow him.

The boy's delight was unbounded; he hovered between a box of bricks and an india-rubber ball, holding a sword in one hand and a glass marble in the other, quite unable to determine which treasure demanded the greater share of his attention. He was somewhat bewildered with his wealth, and any *woman* of sense would have known that one toy would have amused him more than a dozen. Judith, indeed, did protest mildly against the variety of attractions, saying that it was enough to turn his brain; but Uncle Ben laughed at her fears.

"Not a bit of it," he declared; "let him have the whole blessed lot, and choose what he likes best."

If the boy's joy was a little too ecstatic for his happiness to be absolutely perfect, the pleasure he conferred on his two visitors was unalloyed. With his hands and mind equally full, his eyes wide open, and his legs wide apart, he tottered or tumbled from one

thing to the next, and babbled incessantly about all he saw.

"Lord, how happy he is, and how he talks!" cried Uncle Ben, delightedly. "I can't understand one half he says," he continued; "and it seems to me, Mrs. Foresight"—he was always very polite to Judith—"that he learns more in twenty-four hours than I do in a week. I can't keep up with him."

"Aye, he's pretty quick, sir, bless his 'eart," said Judith.

"Everything is a lesson to him," said Jim, picking him up after another "cummle down"; "everything is new and full of interest. It is all future with him, if he only knew it, poor little beggar; but he has no fear, no anxiety; and, in the past, no regrets: he just lives in the absolute present. No wonder he learns quickly. You cannot detect the mark of a pin-prick on a printed page, uncle, but it is pretty apparent on a clean sheet of paper."

"Just so," Mr. Vraille replied, his whole attention absorbed in the winding-up of a top.

Vraille watched the noisy top as it banged up against the legs of the chairs and tables, recoiled from one collision on to another, whizzed from danger to danger—doomed, apparently, to self-destruction—escaped with a dent or two, circled, steadied itself, hummed peacefully in a ruck in the carpet, wobbled, received its quietus at the child's hands, and lay upon its side—dead. Why, his own life had been like that; and now it, too, had settled into a rut. How would it end? But, meanwhile, was it affording the boy gratification? Had he, of late, been neglecting him?

No; he came to see him whenever he could; but was that enough? Was duty alone likely to win the love of that happy little heart? Had gloomy thoughts excluded others which might have been productive of pleasure in the little fellow's rather dreary life, and in his own, where he had found pleasure so hard to produce? Was it possible that that busy little mind, so quick to appreciate, so keen to discern, so incapable of reasoning, had recognised a change of manner, and felt, though it could not understand, his selfishness?

As he sat asking himself these questions, the boy was lashing Uncle Ben's legs with a whip, and chuckling at the old gentleman's contortions of affected fright. Every one, Judith even, was laughing; he alone was moody and pre-occupied, wishing somehow that his legs, instead of Uncle Ben's, were being lashed.

Master Jim soon tired of the whip, and, espying a glass marble on the floor, evinced as much surprise as if he had seen it for the first instead of the twentieth time that afternoon.

"Ickle ballee," he said, holding it in the palm of one chubby hand, while he called Uncle Ben's attention to it with all the fingers of the other. As there was no sort of finality about his own surprise, why should there be about Uncle Ben's? Apparently there was not. The old gentleman had seen that marble more often than even little Jim himself, yet when it was shown to him again, he evinced as much astonishment as he would have done had Rameses the First suddenly walked into the room.

"God bless my soul!" he exclaimed, giving a great jump, and holding up both hands, palms outward, as

he scrutinised the discovery. "Well, that is a marble, and no mistake; wherever did you find that now?"

Little Jim looked up at him for a moment with the wondering expression he always wore when questioned, and then said slowly—

"T'umpet, blow t'umpet 'gain"—("Please," from Judith)—"p'ease, Unkoo Ben."

So the old gentleman set to work again on the penny whistle, and blew lustily, until he suddenly exclaimed—

"Why, Jim, we've clean forgot the Ark!"

This was true. In the excitement of the hour, and amid the general confusion, the Ark, that had given them so much trouble to find, had been overlooked, and still remained "done up" in its brown paper and string.

Its success, when placed in front of the boy, was at once apparent; he ceased to talk. Silently he sat beside it, picking out the animals one by one until the Ark was empty, and then as silently putting them all back again, not two by two according to tradition, but each one by itself, with the greatest possible care and deliberation. This operation was repeated in solemn silence, but then the recognition of old familiar forms set in with forcible expressions of welcome. All his old friends were there, and he greeted each in turn; but the recipient of his loudest acclamations of delight was a certain hybrid chanticleer crossed with turkey blood, which he called a "cockey."

The Ark, and especially the cockey, had won the day, and somehow the father of the boy felt glad.

When the time of departure arrived, the cockey was

still clasped to the boy's heart. He watched without a murmur of complaint all the other toys being packed away into a cupboard; he saw the animals stowed into the Ark without a protest; but when they tried to take the cockey from him, he burst into a flood of tears, and, like the dove in the old story, the cock remained outside.

Uncle Ben struggled into his coat again, and after bidding the boy a boisterous farewell, stepped into the passage with a wink of meaning at his nephew.

Jim in his heart thanked him for his forethought, for he had some private business to transact with Judith. It was soon over, and then he said—

“Judith, if I took the boy to live with me down at St. Dogwells, would you come? I tell you fairly it is an infernal hole.”

“Sir,” said the wooden woman, “where he goes, I goes; until I’m told by you I ain’t wanted no more.”

“I shall never be able to repay your devotion, Judith.”

“He pays me ten times over, thank you, sir—to say nothing o’ your kindness.”

“You are a good woman,” he said.

“I hopes so, sir.”

“Look here,” said Uncle Ben, putting his head in at the door, “when you’ve finished with Mrs. Foresight, I want her here a moment.”

“I’ve finished with her now.” He took the child from her arms, bidding her go and see what Mr. Vraille wanted. She left the door ajar as she passed out of the room, but he was practically alone with his son.

There was a yearning look in his eyes as he stroked

the flaxen curls and tried with gentle touch to turn the boy's averted face toward his own. But little Jim was not thinking of him, nor, for the moment, of the wooden bird he clutched so tightly in his hand; his whole attention was concentrated on the door. "Lalla gone," he said anxiously, and with indications of rising tears.

"Never mind her for one little moment, my boy—my own boy. Look at me—so. Now say 'Daddee dear' just once to please me."

"Daddee de-ar," the child repeated slowly.

"He's going away, little chap, right away—don't struggle so, he'll soon be gone. Will you kiss him once before he goes?"

The rosy lips formed themselves into a pout, shyly touched his sallow cheek with their sweet softness, and opened in a gentle kiss.

"My darling boy! we will be all the world to one another from this day forth. We promise it—don't we?"

"Zes," said little Jim, beginning to look very miserable, and with his eyes fixed on the door again. Alas! he knew not what he said.

He knew what he wanted, though. "Lal-la!" he shouted with a wail, and Judith came.

"Oh, sir," she said, "jus' look at this. Mr. Vraille has given it me for gownds, an' won't listen to a word I says."

Vraille caught sight of a fluttering bank-note as he thrust the child into her arms, and with a hasty word of farewell hurried from the room.

He found his uncle in the drawing-room talking to

Mrs. Flight, who had that minute returned home after an apparently successful raid upon the bookstalls, for she sat beside an open parcel of magazines and papers cutting the leaves of a new *Nineteenth Century*. "Oh, I like to read both sides of the question," she was saying, "and this is about the only periodical nowadays that gives him a chance of ventilating his mistaken—— Well, Jim, how are you? How's the boy?"

Late as it was, she insisted on their staying for "a cup of tea and a chat," and would listen to no excuses. "It is not often," she said, "that I get the chance of talking to intelligent people—they are so shockingly scarce."

So they sat down and sipped her tea; and Uncle Ben, at least, indulged her to the top of her bent. He and the sprightly little old lady were soon immersed in an argument in which little by little Uncle Ben appeared to get out of his depth. But Jim did not pay much attention to what they were saying; he was thinking of the child upstairs, now probably asleep; thinking how thoroughly contented people with hobbies were, even though they lived alone, and wondering if he too would be happy down at Fort Gaunt if he had something interesting to absorb his whole mind, something that would take him out of himself—the child for instance.

When Mrs. Flight had more or less reconstructed the British Constitution and placed it upon a new and sounder basis, they rose to go. Uncle Ben somewhat hurriedly made his escape from the room, but Jim lingered behind to tell her, with many expressions of gratitude for her past kindness to his boy, that he

thought of transplanting him to St. Dogwells. She received the information with composure, but assured him that the child was no trouble to her, and that she was willing to keep him as long as Jim pleased.

"You have been awfully good to him as it is," he said in conclusion, "and I know you would do what you say, but the fact is, I think I should like to have him."

"And he'd be happier with you than here, that's the truth," she burst out. "I'm a selfish old woman, and don't pretend to care about children, but he'll learn to love you and be a comfort to you perhaps. The least that I could do was to give your child a home. I'd do more—more for you than that, if I knew how. I wished to make you reparation; but I fear reparation is impossible. Look here, Jim; I never mention the subject, because I hate the thought of it, but your marriage ought never to have taken place—she was not worthy of you, Jim; I knew it—not so well then as I do now—but still I knew it, and I behaved badly in allowing you to throw yourself away upon her."

"Don't think that," he said; "it would have made no difference."

"I suppose not," she said, looking up into his face. "Oh! she was a fool—a fool—a fool! I hate a fool. There, I've said my say. Good-bye."

She had meant kindly, and he knew it, but still, as Jim descended the stairs, he could not help feeling that he had no one in the world, except Uncle Ben, to look to for sympathy apart from pity; that his troubles would in time become a nuisance to other people; that his boy was not really wanted, and that in the future

they would have to look to one another for everything.

"Uncle," he said, when he and the old gentleman had walked a little way along the street in silence, "I think I'd better take that boy down to St. Dogwells."

"Perhaps it's right he should go," Uncle Ben replied reflectively, "but his going will leave a hole in my life, already as full of holes as a fishing-net."

It was late when they separated that night after their quiet little dinner at the Albany. They had discussed many things, and Major Vraille, as he walked home to his hotel, had much upon his mind.

"It all has to be done," he said to himself as he stood before his dressing-table winding up his watch, "and it may as well be done at once;" and he began to empty his pockets preparatory to undressing. From one of them he drew out an unopened letter. With a gesture, partly of sudden recollection, partly of impatience, he tore it open.

A glance at its contents assured him that it was from no money-lender. It was a long letter, neatly written on thick black-edged note-paper, and the handwriting was clear and characteristic-looking. Sitting down, he drew a candle towards him and began to read. It bore an address he had never heard of, and commenced in the usual way, "Dear Major Vraille":—

"Perhaps you have quite forgotten my existence. I was quite young when you knew me in England, and since then I have only had the pleasure of meeting you once—in India, a little more than a year ago, at a dinner-party. But my name will at once tell you who I am, and why I am writing to you."

He read thus far with weary indifference, and yawned as he turned over the sheets to find out the name of his unknown correspondent. He was tired and wanted to go to bed, and the rest of the long-winded epistle—a request for a loan, or whatever it was—would then very well wait until the morning. But the signature, when he had found it, made him turn back to the first page again and read on:—

“The settlement of my poor father’s affairs all devolved upon me—indeed, I was almost the only relation he had when he died—and although I have had to do many things that would have been better done by a brother or a son, I cannot help feeling glad that, with the rest, this duty and pleasure of writing to you has fallen to me and to no one else.

“I left India soon after hearing the news of his death, but until I came home (to England, I mean, for this is not my home) no details reached me; and even then I did not know of the great debt of gratitude I owed you. But, some time ago now, I received a sealed packet of letters and papers, which had been travelling about after me from address to address, and then I knew all.”

Vraille here turned the page. The writing was now a little more hurried and the style less precise. It seemed that there lay between the lines the record of a struggle between emotion and propriety:—

“Among those papers I found a long official letter describing an attack on a convoy and the brave action that saved my father’s life. It lies before me as I write, and every word of its cold, official language tells me of your gallantry. Even official language cannot

detract from it, although it seems to try to, by detailing all you did as so many facts without comment or emphasis. But perhaps it is best so; they are facts that speak for themselves; no mere words could improve them, though circumstances might, and did."

Then the writer became very complimentary and slightly incoherent; but Major Vraille understood and blushed. He had never been addressed in quite the same way before.

"Oh, I should like," she said, "to be the man who had done those things! I should be so proud if he were a relation of mine. Some day I hope I may meet him, and give him my thanks personally, instead of writing them in a letter which seems to fall so far short of what I think and all I would wish to say."

She went on to explain that her opportunities of seeing newspapers had not been many of late, and supposed that she had thus missed seeing the notification of his "honours." Her congratulations concluded in the remark, "And please believe me when I say that I am glad to think it was my own father who recommended you for your Victoria Cross. This copy of his letter is unsigned and not in his handwriting, but the heading states that it is from him to the General he was serving under at the time, and I shall keep it all my life, and value it almost as much as if it were the original."

At this point Vraille laid her letter down. How did she get that paper? Had it been put amongst her father's private letters by mistake, or had some one sent it to her purposely? He wished she had never seen it; and yet—well, there was no harm done after

all; he could easily write and explain. He went on with his reading.

There was very little more—a few commonplaces, and apologies for not having written before, and the letter concluded with—

“I am living with a country family, far away from Army Lists and military people, and had almost despaired of finding out where you were, when I remembered your having mentioned an uncle, a solicitor, that night at dinner. I managed to get hold of a London Directory, and as there was only one lawyer of the name, am sending this to his address. I should like to know that it has reached you; it would take a weight off my mind.

“With kind regards to Mrs. Vraille, believe me,

“Yours gratefully and sincerely,

“EDITH DARE.”

CHAPTER II.

ST. DOGWELLS.

ST. DOGWELLS, Vraille had told his uncle, was "not much of a place;" others said it was "rather out of the way;" others again declared that it was "a God-forsaken, poke-in-the-corner hole;" while some described it as "a retired little spot." Retired it certainly was—three hundred and odd miles from London and twenty-five from the nearest town of consequence, with nothing in itself or its vicinity of sufficient interest to attract tourists, and lying on the sea-coast out of the track of travellers.

The society of the place was also for the most part retired. There was Colonel Taplow, who had retired from the army, and with a dozen other Taplows—one of them his wife—bivouacked in St. Dogwells as best he could on limited supplies and unlimited demands; and Captain Coxhead, who had retired from the navy, rather precipitately, after running his ship into a pier in broad daylight, whereby the Admiralty had been put to a good deal of expense in the way of repair, and the Captain to a good deal of trouble in the way of explanation. Mrs. Bompas had retired from a wharf in the Mediterranean on the death of her consort, the successful coal merchant, choosing St. Dogwells as a retreat because she was distantly connected with the

whole county, and because her education had been neglected at a school in Chatterleigh, the nearest town of importance and her birthplace; reasons which entitled her to "county family" distinction, and gave her a right to feel thoroughly at home. The Colonel of the St. Dogwells Rifles had retired on a fortune amassed in selling other people's property, the commissions on "going, going, gone!" having obtained him a commission in the Volunteers while his hammer was in full swing, a colonelcy afterwards, and the proud position of squire and justice of the peace in the meantime. Mrs. Bompas was distantly connected with the Colonel's wife (the consanguinity of the neighbourhood was phenomenal), and was second only to her in the St. Dogwells gamut of respectability. Other colonels, commandants of militia and yeomanry, struggled annually out of distant retirements into uniform, and reversed the usual order of things by turning the ploughshare into the sword. There were a good many spinster ladies who had retired from the vanities of the world on annuities, a few widows from its temptations on pensions, one or two shipbuilders, a lawyer, and an undertaking carpenter, on the profits of their respective trades. St. Dogwells was a retired but by no means a peaceful spot; it was generally in the wildest state of excitement—about nothing.

From all of this it might be supposed that St. Dogwells was an insignificant sort of place. Not at all; it was vastly important, not geographically, commercially or historically important, but important in itself. Importance was its principal feature, its essence, its sheet anchor. It was nothing if not

important, except, perhaps, particular—it was very particular.

Though dignified locally by the appellation town, it was in reality little more than a village; or, to be quite accurate, in the transition stage between the two. For it had shaken off primitive simplicity, and, like a hobbledehoy in his first tail-coat, seemed to be consciously struggling with new-found dignity, and trying to assume an independent air, though feeling somewhat ill at ease; hence, perhaps, its importance. It had its post office, railway station, branch bank, town hall, and other public buildings, but no pier, esplanade or season. It had not even the effrontery to face the open sea, but glanced at it sideways, and smiled or frowned, according to the weather, upon creek which ran inland at its feet. From its creek rose up in petty arrogance, disdaining anything like sand or shingle; it was built upon a rock. At the foot of the rock was mud. The rock rose out of the mud, and St. Dogwells out of the rock in amphitheatrical tiers or terraces. Each terrace was a street, and each street was more dilapidated than the one below it. From the upper windows of most of the houses could be seen, a mile or so distant, the grim outlines of Fort Gaunt.

Fort Gaunt stood on the summit of a hill overlooking the sea, and was built in the style of architecture usually affected by penitentiaries and meat-markets. Its “modern type” days were over, but its old armament had recently been replaced by new, which had demanded the attention of a regular garrison in the shape of a battery of artillery.

The prospect of life in quarters in Fort Gaunt held forth attractions to no one but Major Vraile. His captain was a paper man. Young Blythe, his senior subaltern, was supposed to occupy a room in it, but very rarely did, for he was a young gentleman with a soul above St. Dogwells. "It was not good enough," he said, and when unable to get leave, applied to go through a course of instruction that would take him away anywhere out of St. Dogwells. Young Blythe was rather selfish in this respect; but younger Starling, who was a married "man," and lived in the town, did his duty for him uncomplainingly, as a brother-officer should, who in taking unto himself a wife has, *ipse facto*, resigned his right to gad. Fort Gaunt was consequently rather a lonely sort of place to live in; but its field-officers' quarters were good of their kind, and on joining Vraile had determined to occupy them, partly because he had no particular reason for living anywhere else, partly because loneliness was an attraction rather than otherwise.

But this loneliness had brought with it anything but the peace which he had confidently expected would be its necessary consequence. No sooner had he paid a round of duty calls than he was pestered with invitations to "tea" from all sorts and conditions of women, which he was put to the trouble of thinking out plausible reasons for declining, and with invitations to dinner from Mrs. Bompas, who was very civil, which he was put to the trouble of accepting. No one except Mrs. Bompas had asked him to dinner more than once, but every one else seemed to consider him a fair target to pelt with invitations of another kind. He was

invited to subscribe to church steeples, fancy-bazaars, cricket clubs, lifeboats, tea meetings, regattas, races, and, in short, to all sorts of funds, festivities, and charities, by all sorts of societies and individuals. Of most of these applications he took no notice, beyond laughing when they were verbal, and pitching them into his waste-paper basket when they were written; and in a very little time relations became strained between himself and three or four prominent St. Dogwellites. Friction commenced, and found him callous and indifferent. Callousness and indifference were more than anything else calculated to exasperate St. Dogwells; and soon, in sheer self-defence, he found himself involved in a complicated paper warfare with a militia colonel, a volunteer captain, a magistrate of the bench, and a minister of the Church of England. He had only wished to be let alone; but since it seemed that that was a state of existence impossible in St. Dogwells, and his ecclesiastical antagonist had reported him to the War Office for incivility, and the War Office had called on him for an explanation, he took up his pen and fought like a man. It was not difficult to make enemies in St. Dogwells, and James Vraille, with his sense of duty, duty, duty, and his contempt for what he called fraud and fudge and fiddle, went the right way to work to make as many as possible.

These things were irritating, but as nothing compared to the internal strife of the war he was waging with himself. Solitude, he feared, was making him sour; lack of congenial employment, idle; introspection, self-conscious and diffident; thought only led to incredulity, doubt to disbelief, experience to

disillusion, and increased knowledge to a better perception of his own ignorance.

Sometimes, when night after night he had sat alone, reading, thinking, wasting his time, a wild desire for companionship would suddenly seize upon him, and for a time he would feel that he was going mad for the want of some one to talk to. The fit would pass, and leave him more devoted to solitude than ever. For when he looked out upon the world, especially the St. Dogwells world, he was filled with contempt for its ignorance, its insincerity, its "fraud." All this was unhealthy, and he knew it; but although possessed of a constant feeling of slipping downhill—of sinking out of the world's and his own esteem into a useless existence of self-absorbed indolence—he found it well-nigh impossible to shake off his lethargy. He had tried once or twice, and had dosed himself with St. Dogwells gossip until it had made him sick; but the stimulant had done his apathy no good, and such a cure was worse than the disease. And, after all, if he preferred to be as he was, why should he try to be otherwise? He had no one but himself to please; and what possible interest could he be expected to take in a place like St. Dogwells? Why should he try to make himself agreeable to people of the Bompas and Taplow stamp? Their conversation was an insult to his understanding! No; there was not a soul in the place he would cross the road to speak to, though many he would walk a mile to avoid; he would just jog quietly on, doing his work to the best of his ability, and letting the rest slide. But his work was rather monotonous, and he had no one to talk to, as

young Starling had, after it was done. He had jogged on until the quietness of jogging on had become intolerable, and in desperation had packed his portmanteau and gone to London in search of amusement, distraction, dissipation, companionship, the sights and sounds of real life—anything but solitude. The visit had ended, as all such visits did, in disappointment; he had found none of the pleasure he had hoped to find, and had longed for his solitude again. He had come back more discontented with it than ever.

“Shall I never get used to living alone?” he asked himself as his cab rattled over the drawbridge of the fort. “I must, I must.”

But the sound of his footsteps on the stone stairs struck mournfully upon his ear, and the reverberating echoes he awoke in the stone corridors with their white-washed walls reminded him dismally of the emptiness of the rooms he passed on his way to his own—of the emptiness of his existence, the emptiness of hope and effort.

A bright fire burned in his grate; his servant had prepared a little supper for him; the table was spread, and a bottle of claret stood warming on the hearth. The room looked comfortable and cheerful, especially so after the dreariness of his long journey; but it was not home, not so homely as the little house he had visited the day before, where there had been laughter and fun, a desire to please and be pleased, smiles of happiness and contentment, and a prattling tongue to welcome him with “daddee de-ar.” Ah! perhaps that was the reason Fort Gaunt seemed so much more quiet and orderly than usual; it was the recollection of that

little voice that was making all the difference between his quarters and that upper story at Mrs. Flight's.

Major Vraille sat down to his supper in a very discontented frame of mind; but as discontent does not necessarily allay hunger, he speedily disposed of a couple of mutton chops and half his bottle of claret, and then flung himself into an arm-chair by the fire, and lighted a pipe.

The room was comfortably and even handsomely furnished, yet lacked something that prevented him from thoroughly appreciating its advantages. To all appearances there was nothing left to be desired. He was lounging in a seductively luxurious arm-chair, smoking a pipe of good tobacco; his slippered feet rested on one of the many rich Cabul rugs which were strewn about the floor; heavy curtains over the windows and doors protected him from draughts; on one hand, within reach of his arm, stood a handsome oak book-case well filled with books; on the other, a pretty little cottage piano, which he could play sufficiently well to amuse himself; the walls were hung with a number of old engravings, a few oil paintings, and the trophies he had collected on his travels; while all about were littered newspapers, magazines, carpenter's tools, paint brushes, and a hundred other odds and ends of an artistic, literary or useful nature. And yet, with all these pleasant accessories to comfort and occupation, he was dissatisfied with his lot. These things did not make up home; they were only the salvage of a wreck that had once been home, most of them mere memories of the past, but all helping to tell the same dull story of the present. Taste and untidiness, utility and art

were oddly blended; discursive and desultory propensities were suggested in the titles of the books upon the book-shelves, and upon the writing-table were unmistakable signs of method; indications of talent were not wanting, and a natural love of refinement was everywhere apparent. Nor was this all, for on all sides were the evidences of various sports and games enjoyed at different times in a life of exercise and exertion—and behind the door a broken walking-stick, a symbol of spent effort and utter uselessness.

As he smoked idly and surveyed his surroundings in a tired kind of way, a brindled bull-dog waddled into the room and stood in front of him, looking up in his face and wagging his tail, as well as a tail so full of kinks could be wagged.

“Hallo, Wilkes, you’re rather late with your greeting, my friend. Where have you been?” He leant forward and patted the dog’s head.

Mr. Wilkes received the caress with his eyes closed, his thick neck outstretched, and his ears laid back; and then, after one or two ungainly efforts to lick the hand that had petted him, sat down solemnly on his haunches, and watched his master’s face with his bullet head a little on one side. Finding that there was little to be gained by watching, he walked away to the centre of the hearthrug, where he turned slowly round two or three times, and sank down heavily upon his stomach with a deep sigh. Resting his great blunt nose upon his fore-paws, he kept a sharp look-out for some time from the corner of his eye, but soon blinked drowsily, and, after a yawn or two, turned upon his side and fell peacefully asleep.

He was an extraordinarily ugly dog even for a bulldog, and not very valuable; for his former owner, whom Vraille had one day discovered on the beach in the act of making fast a large stone to a piece of rope preparatory to taking Mr. Wilkes for a short sea voyage, had been glad to part with him for a sum equivalent to that which the Inland Revenue had peremptorily demanded, and which he had declined to pay. He had been unable to find any one willing to buy the brute, he said, and the gent might have him cheap; but he'd sooner drown him than give him away. Vraille, in making his purchase, discovered that this humane gentleman's name was Wilkes, and called the dog after him as an easy solution of a difficulty. Afterwards, when he noticed that there was a deal of quiet persuasion about Mr. Wilkes's manner, and that he was treated with far more courtesy and deference than fell to the lot of much handsomer dogs, he determined to retain the name as not altogether inappropriate.

Mr. Wilkes was as well known in St. Dogwells as Vraille was, for the pair were almost inseparable, and both had equally bad characters among all respectable St. Dogwellites.

"You're an ugly beast," he said, looking down fondly at him, "but you're faithful."

Mr. Wilkes opened his eyes, but for the rest lay quite still.

"If you were handsome, now, you might take a fancy to some one else, or rather some one else to you, and so leave me."

Wilkes beat his tail upon the floor and moistened his muzzle with his tongue.

"Yes—grim," said Vraille slowly, drawing a letter from his pocket; "grim is what you are—we are; we live in a grim place, Wilkes, in a grim way, and grim is what we have to be, or perhaps we couldn't bear it all."

The dog looked his appreciation of these sentiments as well as he could, and then closed his eyes again. He was Vraille's confidant on many occasions, and heard many strange things. He at least found no fault with his humours, and seemed to encourage with his never-failing attention that specially bad habit of thinking aloud which was growing on Major Vraille.

"Bless me if I know what to say," Jim muttered as he turned over the pages of his letter; "it will not be so easy to answer as I thought . . . 'All devolved upon me'—Poor girl! and I promised him I would be kind to her if I had the chance . . . 'though circumstances might and did.' What does she mean by that now? Is it just a figure of speech, or an intentional hint that she understands?" Then he read on in silence for some time, only muttering, "Yes, very flattering," in one place, and "my own father, 'my own' underlined," in another, until he reached the end, when he exclaimed—" 'With kind regards to Mrs. ——' Oh! little did she think, when she was taking such pains to write me a *nice letter*, that she could make such a mistake in an ordinary complimentary ending. There is wrong in almost everything. Well, here goes."

He drew a chair up to the writing-table and began to write. Presently he stopped, drew his pen through what he had written, and started afresh. "Oh, I'm too tired to think it out to-night," he said at last, tearing

up his papers after two or three unsuccessful attempts to make even a rough draft of his letter; "I must go to bed now and do it to-morrow. Come along, Wilkes."

The morrow brightened up St. Dogwells considerably. It was a fine day, and Mrs. Bompas determined to pay Mrs. Starling a visit.

There were many reasons for Mrs. Bompas liking this little woman. Mrs. Starling lived in lodgings; she was poor, and dressed quite plainly. Most of the people about (except the "common people," who seemed to like her) said she was stuck-up, and by asking her to dinner every now and again, and visiting her constantly, Mrs. Bompas was afforded capital opportunities of showing independence, hospitality, and patronage, all of which her soul loved; and as Mrs. Starling never gave herself airs, stood in no sort of relationship to her, and, more than all, would listen quietly and sympathetically to all she had to say, Mrs. Bompas liked her exceedingly.

It is a pity that so much civility and condescension had not been bestowed upon a more appreciative nature, for, truth to tell, Cicely Starling never seemed to be overwhelmed by the honour of Mrs. Bompas's marked attention, nor did she show in her manner any sense of labouring under an obligation, in spite of her poverty, but treated the good lady as quite a matter of course, no whit superior or inferior to herself. This calm behaviour rather disconcerted Mrs. Bompas sometimes, but from the first she had continued to call regularly, while other St. Dogwellites, when they had

discovered all they could about the Starlings, ceased to trouble them much with visits; so that it was not long before little Cicely Starling began to feel the pricks of the thorns that retirement hides among its roses.

"I wish, Tom," she said to her boy-husband one day when Mrs. Taplow had been turning up her nose at her—"as if I were rancid butter," as she had expressed it—"I do wish, Tom, you had been ordered to the Fiji Islands, where the savages are real. I thought country retirement would be charming, but I had not counted on country cackle and country bumptiousness."

"Come, come, Cis," said Tom, "you must not make the worst of things. You would hate the Fiji Islanders after you had been quartered there a week, and this is not a bad billet from a pocket point of view."

"No one to speak to except Mrs. Bompas! and she bores me into fits with her clothes and her love affairs; and the worst of it is that when *she* comes there's no knowing when she'll go away again—half an hour for her last frock, an hour for all she has been doing since I saw her last, five-and-twenty minutes to run down her friends, and, to make up the usual two hours, the odd five minutes are usually devoted to *me* and my affairs—that's not exactly the sort of person one can talk *to*, you know."

"Everything, I suppose," said Tom, thoughtfully, "seems strange at first to cockneys in the country; and I must confess that, so far, I cannot make these people out. They are not easy to understand, and I expect they want knowing to find out their worth."

"Worth!" cried Cicely; "they are not worth twopence, the whole lot of them."

"They are retired," laughed Tom.

"They are worse," said Cicely; "they are vulgar."

This was all before Major Vraille had assumed command at Fort Gaunt; and when Tom learnt that he was coming, he had expected great changes. But the changes introduced by his new major were all reserved for Mr. Blythe. Of Tom Starling Major Vraille took little notice, but so much of young Blythe, that that young gentleman was furiously indignant, and said he had never been spoken to in the same way before in his whole service, and would not stand it. But he had to stand it, and a good deal more, until he ultimately went away for the benefit of his professional education. Meanwhile Cicely had found an occupation that made her totally independent of Mrs. Bompas and St. Dogwells, and gave her pleasure from morning until night; indeed, her mind was so fully occupied that even Tom himself sometimes felt neglected.

"I don't hear you complain of having no one to talk to, now, Cis," he said one evening when they happened to be talking of Mrs. Bompas again.

"I don't seem to care so much now," said Cicely.

"No, you appear to have all you want—even without me; and I am left worse off than ever."

"No, no, Tom, don't say that; you are always first, but, you see, you don't want perpetual *attention*—that is what makes the difference."

"Don't I? I want as much attention as ever I did, only I get less—*that* is what makes the difference."

For the next few minutes Tom was the subject of

exclusive and individual attention ; and then Cicely, when her lips were free to speak, said—

“A man, of course, cannot be expected to find interest in anything for long except in another man. It is a pity Mr. Blythe is always away.”

“And precious little use he is to me when he is here—grumbling, scheming to get leave, and perpetually in hot water with Vraille.”

“You certainly are unlucky, poor old Tom ; a nice man for your major would at least have been something.”

“I don’t know what you mean by nice exactly ; he is not nasty—to me at any rate—though he lets Blythe have it pretty hot sometimes ; but Dismal Jimmy is hardly what you would call a conversationalist.” In this irreverent way Tom Starling alluded to his commanding officer. It was a nickname conferred on him by young Blythe, and had superseded all others, to wit—Ursa Major, the Polar Bear (a very happy improvement), Diogenes, Old Fireworks, and others, each of which had had their day, and alluded to some characteristic trait or physical peculiarity discovered in Major Vraille by young Blythe.

“Mrs. Twattle says that every one says that Mrs. Bompas says that Major Vraille is dying of love for her,” laughed Cicely.

“I don’t believe a word of it,” said Tom, indignantly. “He may be everything that is said of him, but he is not a fool.”

“I don’t believe it much either ; but she has promised to tell me all about him some day.”

Now, if Mrs. Bompas had known that the Starlings were accustomed to talk of her in this way, perhaps

she would have postponed the visit she intended paying Cicely that fine day following Major Vraille's return. But she did not know, so she sallied forth from the portals of Golden Hill, and as it was only a step, walked to the lodging-house known in St. Dogwells as Guildhall Villa where the Starlings had made their nest.

Her mode of procedure was characteristic. She waddled into Cicely's drawing-room, blushing like a beetroot (as Cicely afterwards told Tom), simperingly made her salutations, and plumped down a basket of hot-house flowers on a table.

Although Mrs. Bompas did not say a word about them, Cicely knew from experience that the flowers were in all human probability meant as a present for herself; and began to praise their beauty and fragrance, saying how delightful it was to see flowers in winter-time; and as this called forth the remark, "I just picked a few of the best, thinking you might like them, but they were hardly worth bringing," Cicely was enabled to render thanks as well as praise. But she also knew from experience that the flowers alone had not brought Mrs. Bompas, and she wondered whether it were another ring or a new brooch or a contemplated tea-gown to which she was indebted for the present visit. Oh! of course—a fresh supply of ostrich feathers, the result of a large order on the wandering Jews of the Mediterranean.

When the ostrich feathers had been done full justice to in the way of comment, Mrs. Bompas proceeded to expatiate on the delights of life in Malta, a subject that was never far from her thoughts; and then she

compared the society of the island to that of St. Dogwells, very much to the disadvantage of the latter. Gradually losing all the embarrassment that had marked her manner on arrival in the excitement of discussing her neighbours, she threw off her "real sable" mantle, and became thoroughly confidential and complaisant.

"Pouff!" she said, talking of the Coxheads, "who are they, I should like to know, giving themselves such airs? and as poor as church-mice! Don't you have anything to do with them; they don't like Mr. Starling, I fancy, and might be rude."

"It is they who don't have anything to do with us," said Cicely.

"No; and they won't!"

Mrs. Bompas knew the cause of the Coxheads' dislike of Mr. Starling, though she refrained from mentioning it. Tom's unpopularity was simply due to the fact that he formed part of a system which tolerated such men as Vraille, and such dogs as Mr. Wilkes; Major Vraille having once told Captain Coxhead to mind his own business, while Mr. Wilkes had made a large hole in that indignant gentleman's trousers when he paid Fort Gaunt a visit for the purpose of demanding an apology. As often happens in communities more or less important than that of St. Dogwells, Tom Starling acquired discredit at second-hand; and Mrs. Bompas herself did not like him nearly so much as she did his wife; he had a cold way of looking at her that effectually dammed her little flows of soul, and made her feel that she had nothing particular to say.

She dropped the subject, and the Taplows were next passed in review. How *did* they manage to live? Such a family!

Cicely's remark, that their first-born should have been named Gad, to signify a troop was coming, led up naturally enough to ecclesiastical matters, and Mrs. Bompas wondered—she was always wondering—whether the youngest Mr. Little really would marry the eldest Miss Brand, seeing what enemies their parents were, at least so far as their fathers were concerned.

This unfortunately was true. Mr. Little and Mr. Brand were not the best of friends; every one knew that; and St. Dogwells was more or less divided against itself into the two parishes which they represented, their parishioners following the lead of their spiritual guides, and rallying round the standards High and Low. Mr. Brand was Low, severe, uncompromising in promising a hell of the hottest to the wandering sheep of his bucolic flock; while Mr. Little was High, strictly rubrical, and advanced in his notions about candles and collection-bags.

Here Mrs. Bompas was a fund of information. Had Mrs. Starling not heard that Mr. Brand had refused to bury a child of one of the men up at the Fort, because it had died before being christened, and that Major Vraile had taken up the father's cause? Oh, yes, every one was talking about it; there had been a "tremendous row," and Major Vraile had written to the Bishop. Mr. Little had eventually buried the child, but the Major and the High Churchman were not friends either—oh dear no; she had herself heard him refuse Mr. Little point blank to subscribe a penny

towards building a new vestry at the bottom of the church so that the choir might march in procession up the aisle to the chancel, instead of coming in from behind the organ.

She then speculated on the chances of the butcher buying one of her cows, until all the fun was knocked out of Cicely, and her head ached with the strain of keeping her attention at politeness' pitch.

"I have given Miss Meek warning," said Miss Bompas, mention of her cow having brought the focus of her mind to bear on domestic matters; "she does not suit me at all; and my maid Harriet tells me she has no control over the children—worse than that, has been telling them lies. Really, governesses are harder to suit oneself with than servants!"

"You are certainly unfortunate," said Cicely; "Miss Meek is the fourth, is she not, you've had since we've been here?"

"Yes, very unfortunate," Mrs. Bompas replied, gloomily; "they either tell lies, or are ignorant, or stupid, or don't know their place, or something. I have my suspicions, do you know, that Miss Meek drinks. Harriet says so, and really I have myself noticed something queer about her at times. But I have decided not to have a governess at all for the future; I am going to try a sort of companion, you know—a lady by birth, if possible, who can teach the children, and sit at table, and in the drawing-room, and that sort of thing—not a common sort of person exactly. I think I have heard of one who will suit—the daughter of an army man who was killed in the Crimea or the Mutiny or somewhere—I forget the name of the place, though

it was mentioned in the letter I had about her. If her references are good, I think I shall take her on trial."

Cicely did not answer. Often had she pitied this wicked Miss Meek; often had Tom violently declared that he would sooner see a sister of his in her coffin than see her governess at Golden Hill.

Mrs. Bompas did not pursue the subject, but presently changed it for one nearer her heart, so to speak. "Oh, of course I like him in a way," she said, "but it is a pity he is so poor, and had to sell that beautiful horse he bought, when they tell me he rode splendidly the two or three times he went out with the hounds. I expect, poor fellow, he was crossed in love when he was younger. It is quite a kindness to ask him out, and he seems to like coming to Golden Hill, though he will go nowhere else. He came back yesterday, I think you said?"

It was strange that she should seem interested in Major Vraillé's movements, when, as a rule, she piqued herself upon the disdain with which she treated the opposite sex. She even went further, and was speculating on the possibilities of his being a widower, when Tom came into the room, and she promptly took her departure, for Mrs. Bompas had no particular liking for Mr. Starling.

From that day forward, she pervaded, to use Cicely's expression, Guildhall Villa, and, as time went on, became more and more confidential. Little by little she revealed to Cicely the inmost workings of her heart with a zest that spoke well for her own candour and Cicely's powers of endurance. Before confiding them, however, she would always extract a promise of

profound secrecy, which Cicely gave, and broke in every particular when she next saw Tom. The complacent widow rarely talked about any one but herself, and took it for granted that St. Dogwells in general discussed nothing but Mrs. Bompas, hence the importance of secrecy; "For it would never do," she said, "to have these things known in the town."

Poor deluded creature! There was not a shop-keeper or servant in the place who did not pretend to know more of the ins and outs of Golden Hill affairs than its mistress knew herself. Had not Cicely been told over and over again how Alfred the footman—called by the townsfolk Alfred Bompas—and Harriet the maid ruled their mistress with a rod of iron, managed her household, sold the produce of her poultry-yard under her very nose, and kept open house whenever she was away? Did not Cicely know full well that Alfred and Harriet had often declared that no governess should stay at Golden Hill if *they* were expected to wait upon her? As Mrs. Starling listened to the self-satisfied widow's vapourings, she felt quite sorry for her, and disgusted with herself for having acquired such a fund of spiteful tittle-tattle. Should she tell her outright what people said of her—that the lawyer's wife declared she was afraid of her own footman; that the doctor's wife laughed at her for running after Major Vraille without being able to catch him; that the shop-people giggled when her prune silk swept past their doors; that the local dressmaker, whom she had snubbed one day, was in the habit of making remarks about the difficulty of fitting such a figure as Mrs. Bompas's, which were repeated

as the best jokes in St. Dogwells, that same dressmaker having a tongue as sharp as her needle? But no; it was no business of hers. Mrs. Bompas knew as much, it seemed, about other people as other people knew about Mrs. Bompas, and so long as she did not pry into the little sacred secrets of Guildhall Villa, which she always seemed far too absorbed in herself to wish to do, Cicely did not care. But she could not help feeling a certain amount of interest in the attentions Major Vraille was apparently paying the good lady, and which, Mrs. Bompas said, were becoming more apparent every day. This was strange, because Tom declared that the Major had not spoken to Mrs. Bompas half-a-dozen times in his life; and what could an unsociable old bachelor like "dismal Jimmy" see to admire in a widow who cast a large shadow, dressed and talked as Mrs. Bompas dressed and talked, was the mother of such children as Algernon and Gwendoline, and whose manner to men was systematically rude? It was her money perhaps! But Mrs. Bompas was quite aware of the attraction that existed in the fortune left her by the late lamented coal-heaver, as Cicely called him, and for that very reason kept men at a distance.

"I'm not going to have them fooling round Golden Hill any more than I like," she said; "and I can soon let them know when they are not wanted."

And yet she took the keenest interest in the after movements of any who had honoured her house with a visit, and if they by chance wrote to her, their letters were preserved with the greatest care. Many of them she had read aloud to Cicely, her whole countenance beaming with what looked like pleasure, but was of course

nothing but indignation. One unfortunate had been driven to the verge of desperation, and hinted at self-destruction. The sarcasm of the passage was lost upon Mrs. Bompas, who pitilessly exclaimed, "Pouff! let him get over it!"

But the few notes Major Vraille had written her were just now of paramount importance. After much reading between the apparently commonplace lines, they turned out to be the most insidious epistles ever penned by man to woman. And then the old story was all gone over again—his calls, his acceptances of invitations to her house, his glances and meaning speeches.

"I know what he wants well enough," said Mrs. Bompas, reddening and looking supremely happy, "and the whole place is abusing me for the way I treat him; but, bless you, I don't care what people say. By-the-way, what does your husband think of it all?"

Cicely inferred that Tom troubled his head little about such things.

"Oh, but they get talking together, I'll be bound," said Mrs. Bompas rather disappointedly. "I gave him a bit of a snub the other day," she went on, "and have not seen him since. He asked me if I thought him weak-minded. I drew myself up stiffly—just as I am doing now—and said calmly, as calmly every bit as I am speaking to you at the present minute, that I thought he was. You *should* have seen his face; he turned perfectly scarlet. Now didn't that serve him out well?"

"But why did you want to serve him out at all?" asked Cicely.

"Oh, just to let him see that I was my own mistress, and was not going to put up with any nonsense. If you are the least bit civil to a man, he at once thinks you are dying of love for him. Of course he would give his ears (and she nodded her head mysteriously); but I'm in no hurry, especially for a man that has nothing to live on beside his pay."

"She has talked herself into the belief," Cicely said afterwards to Tom, "that she is the most fascinating woman in St. Dogwells and the catch of the place."

"So she is," laughed Tom.

In the course of a very few months, Major Vraille, partly by quick resentment of interference, partly by acts of common courtesy, had spun a tangled web about himself which threatened to embarrass him none the less for his being wholly unconscious of its existence; and the threads of affection in it were perhaps likely to prove just as troublesome as those of distrust and dislike. Moreover, there had always been a mystery about him which St. Dogwells had resented as beyond its understanding.

Simple-minded St. Dogwellites! Little did they dream that the Major Vraille whose secluded habits filled their little minds with wonder and speculation, had a surprise in store for them which, far from clearing up this mystery, was calculated to render it somewhat more incomprehensible than ever.

Tom Starling was the first to suspect its advent.

"I think Vraille is going to have some one down to stay with him," he said to Cicely. "He is furnishing some more rooms in the fort, and getting in a whole lot of things, too."

Rumours as to the nature of the orders that Major Vraille was giving in the town, excited the curiosity of St. Dogwells for a day or two, but not a hint was heard about the expected visitor himself. St. Dogwells was not left long in doubt. The Major made his arrangements quietly but speedily, and the reason for them was explained sooner than was expected.

Mrs. Bompas came tearing down to Guildhall Villa, her face in a flame, her bosom in a flutter, and her breath rather short.

"Who *do* you think came down by train from London last night and were met by Major Vraille?" she asked.

Cicely could not guess.

"A woman and a baby!"

CHAPTER III.

LITTLE JIM.

As James Vraille gazed into his child's large eyes, and saw his image reflected in the calm, clear depths of their passive blue, it seemed to him that he was standing at the fountain of life, and that his thirsty soul was drinking in its waters. A few days had sufficed to tell him that a fresh vitality was quickening his pulses, bracing up his muscles, filling him with new energy, new hope, new interests. The childish voice touched chords in his heart that had too long been silent, and made them vibrate with thrills of unmixed pleasure; the childish tongue reminded him of truths he had well-nigh forgotten; and in the childish face he could read lessons which all his books had failed to teach. Even the childish nature was infectious, and he himself felt younger; he, too, began to look with interest on common things; he, too, in very sympathy, found himself wondering and speculating and admiring, losing in great sense the *trouble* of thought, its perplexity and anxiety, and regarding it as a mental pleasure instead of a mental exercise. Already some of the sadness was departing out of life, some of its joy returning.

He sat in his comfortable arm-chair, with a book upon his knee and a pipe in his mouth, thinking. It

was late, and the fort was silent—as silent as it had ever been at that time of night. But the stone corridors had rung with sounds of laughter all the day, and the room in which he was sitting had been full of noise. The echoes of a small, glad voice seemed to hang about it still, and upon a sofa opposite him stood a large unpainted ark. Mr. Wilkes lay snoring at his feet, grim as usual; but even Mr. Wilkes had come in for a small share of the recent gaiety, and for a very large share of admiration.

Vraille was not reading, but on the page before him was a scored passage which ran—"Infancy presents body and spirit in unity: the body is all animation." On the book-shelves beside him were many books, and all of them bore pencil-marks upon their pages—paragraphs marginally noted, sentences underlined, chapters and headings dated. In this way he had been endeavouring to discipline his mind and add to his small store of knowledge. In thought he had hoped to find contentment, through knowledge to acquire peace. He had found plenty of food for reflection in his marked passages—there were hundreds of them, all pregnant with thought; but what contentment could they bring?—"Solitude is impracticable, and society fatal;" "Coop up most men and you undo them;" "For the deadliest of all wet blankets give me a middle-aged man who has been most of a visionary in his youth;" "When the world has once begun to use us ill, it afterwards continues the same treatment with less scruple or ceremony;" "Isolation is the sum-total of wretchedness to man." His reading did not lead to much, and as for his

knowledge, the more he read, the more certain he became that it was simply infinitesimal. This certainty was not conducive to peace, but to conflicting emotions, doubt, fear, hopeless resolutions—anything but peace.

But latterly a new train of thought had arisen. He was studying a philosophy of pure faith, inculcated by a mind that doubted nothing, feared nothing, disbelieved in nothing, and he began to find and mark other passages in his books, such as—"Every failure is a step to success;" "Perfect ignorance is quiet, perfect knowledge is quiet; not so the transition from the former to the latter;" "Whatever is the subject of faith should not be submitted to reason;" "How infinitely graceful children are before they learn to dance;" "Great thoughts come from the heart;" and one other, too well remembered to be read again, too familiar to be marked that it might not be forgotten, "Of such is the Kingdom of Heaven."

With the fresh turn given to his thoughts, his feelings had all altered, and soon he recognised that he himself had undergone a change, and, within a comparatively short space of time, had become another and a happier man. But the causes that had brought about this change in himself were not those that could in any way influence a child, and little Jim's affections, inclinations, disposition, must, he felt, for some time to come, remain the same. He was but a child—ignorant, simple little child, without the power to reason, without recollection even, with no sense of duty, no emotions springing from the knowledge of obligation, for he had no such knowledge; the ties

relationship were as nothing to him, and he could not love simply because he should. But he loved Judith. His whole heart and soul—which with him meant his whole selfishness—was wrapped up in Judith; she was necessary to his comfort, his amusement, and, consequently, his happiness. There were, then, other influences by which he could be won, and very powerful ones, apparently. Thus Major Vraille, arguing it out in his man's mind, came to the conclusion that the child's love had to be won gradually by patience and perseverance; and by making himself useful, necessary to him, he hoped in time to find his way into his heart, as Judith had already done. So he set about wooing the boy with all his accustomed earnestness, and with something beside that made his task a pleasure.

Sometimes he thought that he was making rapid progress, at others that a stern look, a quick word, an unmeant asperity of manner, had lost him much of the ground he had before made good. He could not tell; the boy's demeanour was no certain index of his own success or failure; it was never the same for long, and from its numberless fluctuations he found it impossible to strike a mean. Once, when he held out his arms to the boy and he did not come, but stood looking at him wistfully, he said to Judith—

“He seems rather frightened of me still; but I suppose he'll get over that in time.”

“Bless his honest little heart,” she replied, with the usual aspirates missing, “till now he's never had but half a chance o' knowin' ye; an' he's not frightened, sir, but only a bit shy. He's ready enough to love any one that's kind to him, let alone you, sir, who's

allus been so good; an' he's that affectionate and thoughtful-like, you'd never guess, only seein' him sometimes. His thoughtfulness made him a bit backward with his speech, p'r'aps, but now he can say pretty near anythink he likes, an' he'll be talkin' to yer nineteen to the dozen soon."

This was a long speech for Judith, but he listened to every word of it attentively.

"I want him to get to like me," he said; "but, Judith, I don't want him, for that reason, ever to like you a bit the less."

She smiled.

"It'll all come," she said; "all in different ways."

He hardly understood; how should he? What should a glum major know about nurses and children? What reason had he to hope that he could insinuate his gaunt image into the boy's heart? And, come to that, as St. Dogwells very justly remarked, what right had he to bring a child to Fort Gaunt at all? At best, playing with a baby was but a sorry occupation for a *man*—and such a man!

But he neither knew, nor cared to know, what St. Dogwells thought; his quarters were his own, to do what he liked with; and if a set of miserably ignorant people had been too busy with their own "endless chatter and blast" to hear the social news of the world outside their back-of-the-earth corner, that was no fault of his. It never occurred to him that all his movements were the subject of criticism in St. Dogwells, still less that St. Dogwells' curiosity would extend to the direct catechism of Judith. But such appeared to be the case.

"I takes natural-like to barricks, sir," she said to him one day a few weeks after her arrival; "an' I'd jus' as soon live in a fort as anywheres else. But what business is that of anybody's but mine and yours, sir?"

"Why, who has been interfering with you?" asked Jim, indignantly.

"All sorts," Judith replied; "they seems to think nothing o' stoppin' yer in the street under pretence o' speakin' to the baby, and arskin' all manner o' questions, such as they didn't oughter ask."

There was something in her manner which betrayed an uneasiness of conscience and a desire to unburden her mind; and Mrs. Foresight never addressed him of her own accord without good cause. He shrank from inquiring into the nature of the questions that had been put to her, and somehow guessed that she did not wish him to ask.

"The people here are inclined to be impertinent," he said; "but you must not mind that. If they wish to know anything about *me*, I have nothing to conceal."

"It's jus' this ways, sir, beggin' yer pardon; they are bent on findin' out every bit they can about yer, an' they don't mind lettin' me understand they want to. If yer was ter kill me for it, I couldn't tell a lie; but, with yer permission, I could give some of these folk a bit o' my mind, an' tell 'em things they p'r'aps *don't* want to know."

He knew she spoke the truth, absolutely; he knew that hers was a nature that could not quibble, much less lie; he knew that he could trust her as he would trust himself; and he knew, too, that she possessed a

marvellous control over her tongue, and that gossip was a thing unknown to her ; but he had never before so fully appreciated the false position in which they both were placed.

"Judith," he said, solemnly, "I have good reason to trust you implicitly. You have my whole confidence. Do as seems to you best, and it will be right. I neither wish you to lie, nor even to prevaricate. In a little while anything there is to know will be placarded before the eyes of the world, and I care absolutely nothing what these people think or say. You are at perfect liberty to tell them anything you think fit. But there is another thing that I do care about—are you yourself satisfied? Shall I take a house in the town for you and little Jim?"

"As you please, sir; but not on my account. Me and Master Jim wants no company, especially of the sort we're likely to find down town among that there cacklin' lot, an' I think we're a good bit comfortabler where we be."

She was satisfied, and quite happy in her mind again, for she knew what to do when she next met with anxious inquiries about Mrs. Vraile.

"No," she said to Mrs. Taplow, who happened to meet her soon afterwards, and began to ply her with questions in an off-hand way,—“no; Mrs. Vraile is *not* coming to St. Dogwells, ma'am; and Mrs. Vraile is *not* dead that I knows of; and Major Vraile is *not* the sort of gentleman that minds folk pokin' and pryin' into his affairs, as p'r'aps Colonel Taplow would if the Major poked and pried into his, which, *being* a gentleman, he has no thoughts o' doin'.”—“No,” she said to

Mrs. Bompas's maid, the gaudy Harriet, turning on her like a tigress, "you may go and tell yer mistress, who sent yer, that he has *no* other children, that this boy is his only one, and that his name's James Vraille like his father's, and not Bompas, thank 'eaven!—not nothin' whatsoever to do with Bompas; and that *my* name's Judith Foresight, and that hif she wants to know any more, she can jus' come to me herself, instead o' sending her scullery-maid dressed up in her clothes."

In like manner she answered all inquiries and questions, making not a few enemies in the cause of truth, and hardly adding to her master's popularity.

There was one lady in the town, however, who had once or twice stopped to speak to her and admire her charge without asking any impertinent questions. Judith spoke of her alone as a lady—all the rest were women.

Cicely Starling had no need and no desire to cross-question any one; she knew the secret of little Jim's history, and she was sorry.

"Oh, Tom," she said, "I can never like that horrid Mr. Blythe again for having written you such an unkind letter about Major Vraille's misfortune. I can see nothing to laugh at in a woman running away from her husband, and leaving behind a poor little innocent child; and such a dear little fellow, too! I feel sure that Major Vraille was not a bit to blame; I believe he is a good man, for he seems devoted to the boy, and he's never been anything but nice to us."

"No, never," Tom admitted.

"I like him," said Cicely, decidedly; "and some day I'll be kind to him."

She had heard many disparaging accounts of his habits, disposition, temper, but she could not remember having ever heard anything to his credit, even from Mrs. Bompas, who only estimated merit in other people by the amount of interest they showed in herself. She knew from personal experience that he had a shy, diffident manner, and was not easy to talk to; and even Tom, the easy-going Tom, admitted that he was "a rum sort of chap;" while Mr. Blythe had often declared him to be "a rude brute." Yet, in spite of all these things, Cicely Starling was guided by her womanly instinct into the belief that, at heart, Major Vraile was not a bad man. And why? Simply because, when she stopped to speak to little Jim in the street—as she stopped to speak to every child in the place—the boy had always a whip, or a top, or a gun in his hand, which he explained to her had been given him by "daddee." This daddee, she illogically argued, must in consequence be a good man at heart.

She had taken a fancy, too, both to the boy and to Judith. She had a child of her own, and that fact alone invested every child she met with interest; but there was a certain dignity of demeanour and air of refinement about little Jim which was specially attractive, and told her at once that he was a little gentleman.

"He's a charming little fellow," she once said to Judith; "and I expect you and Major Vraile are very proud of him. I should be if he were mine; I never met a boy with nicer little manners."

The wrinkles seemed to disappear out of Judith's hard face as it relaxed into something like a smile.

"The Major's somethin' more'n proud of him, Mrs. Starling, ma'am," she said. "He thinks a'most o' nothin' else, I do believe."

Mrs. Foresight knew, if any one did, that James Vraille was fond of the boy, but even she did not know all.

Who beside himself could analyse the feelings that had prompted what Judith called his "lovin'-kindness," and Cicely his "devotion"? Who beside himself knew of the void that had seemed to exist in his heart for years past? Who but he could tell that the child's companionship was tending to fill that void, and that his bright young presence was creating a new and almost happy life for him out of his recent loneliness?

He was grateful for these things, and perhaps gratitude was one of his reasons for wishing to make the boy's surroundings as cheerful and pleasant as possible. But, apart from that, there was the remembrance of his own childhood, and the thought that he held this child's future in the hollow of his hand. It was a solemn thought, a grave responsibility. He wished him to be happier than he himself had been, and he believed that his future happiness would in great measure depend upon his present training. He could not change his temperament, whatever it might turn out to be, but he could control or encourage, as seemed desirable, his tastes and disposition; he could direct his thoughts, educate his mind, and, to a certain extent, regulate his actions. He could, above all, show him the consequences of folly and ignorance, those chief mainsprings of evil, and so guard him against an immense amount of harm.

The father was almost as simple as the son. No doubt he could do all he promised himself he would do, but he quite forgot that he could never impart the knowledge he himself had learnt from experience, and that experience was the only task-mistress capable of teaching little Jim life's sternest and most useful lessons. With this radical error in his calculations how could he ever hope to work his sum out anything like right? What would all his metaphysical analysis benefit him in his endeavours to gain his child's affection? Were his anxious thoughts likely to tend to the boy's happiness? No. Many of his hopes were doomed to disappointment, and his theories, when they came to be put to the practical test, were pretty sure to fail. And yet, in spite of mistakes, in spite of want of knowledge in such matters, his perseverance met with its reward, and a something that was founded on no system, guided by no principle, led him on gradually to success. Little Jim began to express a desire to be with big Jim, and big Jim felt gratified and recompensed.

Soon an exceedingly good understanding was arrived at between them, and principally through the agency of Vraile's uniform. When Vraile was in uniform, his son regarded him with awe and admiration. The "jolly soldiers" whom Judith had so often shown him in his picture-books had always possessed a great attraction for him; but now that for the first time in his life he had an opportunity of seeing them in the flesh, he was fairly fascinated. He loved them all, but was drawn especially to that particular one whom he could minutely inspect and even handle. His fingers

clutched the buttons of Vraille's tunic one by one, and each filled him with fresh admiration.

"Pitty buttut," he said, beginning at the top; "'nother pitty buttut; and 'nother pitty buttut"—and so on all the way down. Nothing escaped his notice, from the "money" which he was surprised to find his father wore upon his breast, to the "prickey tings" that stuck out from his heels. And then there was the bright "*yearl hord!*" The sight of that "real sword" never seemed to pall, and Vraille often put it on when there was no better reason for doing so than that the child might hear it clank. It was that sword which coloured the greater part of little Jim's conversation, and implanted in his heart his first ambition.

"Me going be a 'olly 'olear thum day, 'ike daddee, an' bo^{ve} a *yearl hord*," was his constant remark.

Br "My boy," said Jim, on one blissful occasion, "I'm not a particularly *jolly* soldier that I know of, but we'll see if we can make you into one."

So he bought the boy a sword straightway, and gave an old jacket and forage-cap to Judith, who cut them down—cut them nearly all away, in fact—and little Jim was dressed up in what he called "*yearl 'olly 'olear cloze*." He had never been more completely satisfied in his life, and he was puffed up with pride to such an extent that he could barely speak. But when not dressed in "*'olly 'olear cloze*," he could, as Judith had declared, say almost anything, though what he said was not always easy to understand. His language was sadly deficient in pronouns, *me* doing duty for a great many others, and his sibilants and dentals gave him a good deal of trouble. Vraille

consequently, had some difficulty at first in construing such a sentence as, "Me going take boy 'iding wizzoo, daddee? Yes. Thum day. In me poneeancart—hink." But soon he began to understand, and the better he did so, the more he wondered. The "hink" that concluded so many of the boy's remarks meant "think," and was always spoken in a tone of deep meditation and speculative assurance combined that was absurdly comic coming from a dot of humanity who knew nothing and had no right to form any sort of opinion; yet Vraile sometimes fancied that in this "hink" might lie the touchstone of the boy's character; and as he looked at the pensive little face and wondered if it were so, his first feeling of amusement would subside gradually into one of gravity. The pony and cart had only been promised; but a promise, to him, was a fulfilment. The vehicle already existed, not in his imagination, but in his absolute belief, somewhere close at hand, ready for him to get into at a moment's notice.

"Never," said Vraile, in answer to his remark, "will I break a promise once made to you, my boy: it would shake that infinite faith of yours, and ruin it."

Mr. Wilkes was an attraction hardly less powerful than Vraile's uniform. The "goggie" afforded Master Jim infinite amusement and delight. He pulled his ears and tail, he trod on his toes, he poked his fingers into his eyes and mouth, he worried him and petted him, he tried to carry him, and lay down on the floor beside him, talking to him. He told him all he had been doing, and asked him questions in return; he never left him in peace for two minutes at

a time, while he was in the room with him. In short, he led him on all occasions, without scruple or compunction, a dog's life; and Mr. Wilkes, the terror of the neighbourhood, far from resenting such treatment, seemed rather to like it. The dog was hideous to behold, the boy was very nearly a cherub; but, if ever true sympathy existed, it existed between the pair. No matter how his ears were twisted, Mr. Wilkes never so much as winked his eye; no matter how awkwardly he might waddle about the room, knocking up against things and occasionally upsetting them, he never touched the child; and a wag of his tail would have been almost enough to knock him down. Mr. Wilkes was a very generous dog, little Jim a very fearless child.

Vraille, with a daily, and almost hourly, increasing pleasure, noticed all these things, and many more; and as he began to know his son better, he began to think (unlike most parents) that the boy was a prodigy: he was so amusing, so attractive, so fearless, so quaint, so observant, so shrewd in his remarks, so utterly guileless, sometimes so frightfully naughty, and always so woefully repentant afterwards. "Me been a orful orty boy," he would explain when his eyes were rather red and puffy; "me 'ood boy now; me 'orry, daddee; daddee not 'ip boy—hink."

"No, I could not; I simply could not whip you, Jim—unless you were to tell a lie; then I think I would. But you mustn't be a naughty boy."

"No—not be orty boy 'gain."

"That's right," the elder Jim would say, taking him on 'his knee and kissing him; but in his heart he felt it was not right—that sternness and correction would

have to come some day, and that the child's promises were piecrust of the flimsiest description. But that day was not yet. In the meantime his love and confidence had to be gained; respect would surely follow.

True to his promise, Vraille searched the advertisement columns of the local papers, attended fairs and auctions, made known his wants to one or two "horsey" gentlemen, and at last succeeded in finding a reliable pony and a suitable cart.

When this equipage stood in the barrack square, and little Jim, holding his father's hand, looked at it preparatory to taking his first drive, his exclamations of delight made the walls of the old fort ring again.

"Yearl poneeancart," he cried, stamping his feet with excitement; pony got yearl tail an' pitty curls; me goin' 'idin' in yearl poneeancart—'anter kiss ponee tail."

"No, no," said Jim, catching him up and jumping into the cart; "you can't do that. There sit on my knee, so, and keep as quiet as you can. Now, here we go! Well, what is it?"

"Lalla come, too; Lalla come too."

"No, she'll come another day."

"Lalla come nudder day," he repeated, leaning back and shouting to a retreating female figure in the passage behind him as they moved on. "'Ook 'olly 'olear," he cried to the sentry on the gate, "me got yearl ponee now!, 'Olly 'olear can't come with daddee—on'y boy." And so they crossed the drawbridge, Vraille looking rather confused as he returned the sentry's salute, and little Jim turning round to shout him a shrill good-bye with the assurance that the

"poneeancart" would come back "thum day" for Lalla.

At the tip-top of his voice Master Jim encouraged the pony and importuned his father.

"Gee-up, ponee dear!" he cried. "Daddee ip oo—boy got 'ip home—daddee got big 'ip—boy 'ants daddee 'ip—boy 'ants 'ip ponee—gee-up, gee-up—oh! poneeancart 'topped—'ook, daddee! ickle piggee in er woad—goggie in er woad—come on, goggie" (this to Mr. Wilkes, who, with lolling tongue and leisurely gait, was slowly following them). "ponee going on 'gain—gee-up ponee—boy 'ants 'ip ponee—p'ease—" and so on unceasingly.

"Look here," said Jim at last, looking down at the little writhing figure on his knee; "you must try and moderate your transports and sit still, or we shan't get along at all."

"Me 'ants ter drive ponee self—me 'ants t'hold 'ip."

"Well, you shall drive yourself then; here, catch hold of the reins. Hold 'em tight now, or the pony will run away." He put the end of the reins where they were buckled together into his hand, and this quieted him considerably, so far as movement was concerned, for he now imagined he had an important duty to perform, and held the buckle clenched in both chubby fists; but his expressions of delight at all he saw, his exhortations to the pony, his asides to Mr. Wilkes, and his perpetual questioning of his father on all sorts of subjects relevant and otherwise, abated not one jot.

When they reached the town, through which they were obliged to pass, Master Jim recognised many

friends, and saluted them all in loud tones, never failing to call special attention to the "poneecart."

Every now and again he turned his face, flushed with excitement, up to his father's, and said, "Daddee, dear."

The pony was not a fast-goer, and their progression was slow, so that St. Dogwells had ample opportunity to see and enjoy the fun. Blinds were pulled up, noses were flattened against window-panes, shop-boys giggled, servant-maids stared, passers-by stopped to look; but James Vraile, utterly unconscious of these signs of interest, drove solemnly on.

"Lor, ma!" exclaimed the eldest Miss Coxhead; "there's that Major Vraile driving with his brat in a pony-cart."

"Come away from the window, then, and don't let people see you looking at him," said the maternal Coxhead, hurrying to catch a glimpse of what her daughter had described; "he's not a proper person for you to notice in any way, my dear."

Mrs. Bompas saw him from a shop counter, where she was making some minor purchases in company with a tall girl dressed in black, a stranger to St. Dogwells.

"Look quick!" she whispered, nudging her companion with her elbow. "Do you see that man with grey hair driving a pony-carriage?"

The girl turned her head slowly, and with a rather haughty movement backward in her chair drew her arm out of reach of the pushing elbow. "No," she said, with a ring of musical merriment in her voice, "I did not, I am afraid. Is he a celebrity?"

"Hush! no, nothing particular; only—but I'll tell

you about him some other time ;” and Mrs. Bompas, blushing brightly, went on with her purchases.

Colonel Taplow saw him.

“What can the army be coming to when officers are allowed to make exhibitions of themselves in this way?” he said to his wife as Vraille raised his hat to them.

Mrs. Taplow bowed and smiled.

“His whole life is an exhibition of immorality,” she replied.

“’Ook Mis’ Taplow!” yelled Master Jim. “Boy holdin’ *heins*, and drivin’ *yearl* poneecancart.”

“Gently, my son,” said Jim, “not quite so loud, there’s a good little chap.” He might as well have cautioned a thunderstorm.

“’Top! ’top, ponee!” cried the boy excitedly, a little further on. “Me ’ants ter get out.”

“No, no,” said Jim, “sit still; you can’t get out. Come, be a good boy, or I must take you home.”

But even this threat was of no avail.

“’Top! ’top!” he screamed; “me ’ants ter get out—me ’ants ’ponge-cake. Whoa! ’top, ponee—’top ponee, de-ar!”

So, in the middle of the town, Vraille was obliged to stop.

“I’ll just think twice before I take you out with me again, you obstinate young rascal. Now, if I get you a sponge-cake, will you promise me to be good?”

The child left off shouting and looked up at him, his face all quivering with excitement, and a look of solemn sadness dawning in his large, serious eyes.

“Me not a orty boy, daddee,” he said slowly.

"No, not a bit, God bless your simplicity, not a bit a naughty boy. Oh, how careful, how truthful we ought to be! I did not mean to hurt your little feelings, Jim, boy; indeed I didn't."

"'Ant a 'ponge-cake, daddee."

"Come on, then. You should have a thousand, if they were not likely to give you croup or something."

As there was little chance of the pony running away, Vraille left him to his own devices while he carried the boy into the confectioner's shop which Master Jim's quick eyes had detected, and with which he turned out to be tolerably well acquainted.

"Mrs. Foresight often brings him in for a bun or something," the shopwoman explained, as Jim made known his wants; "he's very fond of them sponge-cakes, too; ain't you, dickey? Little Jim's a great favourite in the town, I can tell you, sir," she added, as she put the cake into the boy's hand and *sked* him for a kiss.

Vraille laid sixpence on the counter and forgot to take up his change.

Soon they were on the road again, and now Master Jim, busily engaged with his cake and *covering* himself and his father with crumbs, was fairly quiet.

It was a beautiful day; summer had been long in coming that year, and now that it had come at last, nature seemed all the more glad to see it, and was smiling pleasantly. For weeks past the same dry wind which had robbed the spring of half its beauty had been whirling the dust in clouds over the parched country and along the clean, *wept* roads, piling it up into little heaps behind *doo-ways* and in corners

smothering everything, and causing the farmers to complain with more than the usual dissatisfaction of their class at the want of rain. The little that had fallen had been licked up by the dry tongue of the fierce east wind before it could sink below the surface of the thirsty soil. But a shower overnight had washed the dust away, and the fields looked fresh and cool; and though the land still wanted rain, the genial sun and gentle air were doing their best to deck it out gaily for the summer.

It was a delightful drive, Vraille thought, who, happy in himself, perhaps, was in the humour to admire. The ferns in the banks and hedges were pushing up their fronds like bishops' croziers in miniature; and here and there a foxglove nodded its stately head at them as they passed. Sweet scents were borne on the gentle breeze, and the drowsy air was full of the hum of insect-life. Overhead rang out the joyous song of the lark, and from afar came the mechanical notes of the cuckoo's cry. Thoroughly as he enjoyed the sense of peace inspired by these sights and sounds, and much as he would have liked to prolong his drive, for the child's sake he turned when they had gone a mile or so beyond the town, fearing he would be tired before they reached home. The cake was by this time finished, and little Jim's mouth again free to give full vent to his feelings, which he did with enthusiastic shrillness. He told his father all sorts of stories about the places, people, and animals they passed on the road; he recounted former experiences, and suggested possibilities with an appended "hink." In fact he was exceedingly communicative and agreeable, filling up all

pauses in the conversation with "Gee-up, ponce," and "Come on, goggie," until they reached the town once more. Here he suddenly became excited. "Mis' Tharling," he shouted, alternately waving his arms and pointing. "Oh! Mis' Tharling—'ook, daddee!"

Vraille looked in the direction thus vaguely indicated, and saw his subaltern's wife a little way ahead.

Little Jim continued to jump and wriggle and shout "Mis' Tharling—I 'ove oo!" until they overtook the little lady, when Vraille raised his hat, and she smiled and nodded.

"'Top! 'top, ponceancart! Mis' Tharling, me 'ants ter get out!"

There was no help for it. They stopped; and Vraille began to make his apologies for his son's behaviour.

"He never lets me pass without a word," said Cicely. "You know me, don't you, little Jim?"

"There is not much doubt about that," said Vraille, laughing.

"Oh, he's a charming boy, Major Vraille. Every one loves him, and he and I are the best of friends. I've been meaning to ask you, the first time I saw you, to let him come down and play with my little girl some afternoon. Now do, Major! when shall it be?"

"The sooner the better," laughed Jim, good-humouredly. "Shall I send him down to-morrow?"

"To-morrow, by all means—at four, say?"

"Or, if you will allow me, Mrs. Starling, I will bring him myself."

"Yes, please do," said Cicely; and with this understanding between them, they went their separate ways,

Vraille to his fort, where Master Jim burst into a passion of seemingly inconsolable grief on being parted from his "poneecancart," Cicely to her lodgings to tell Tom of the arrangements she had made for the morrow.

"There he sat," she said, "with scarcely any room for his long legs in that little pony-cart, the child cuddled up on his knee, his clothes all tumbled and untidy, and simply covered with crumbs, looking as happy as a king. If it were not for you, Tom, I'd love that man."

Punctually at four o'clock next day the pony-cart stopped in front of the lodging-house front door. Mrs. Bompas saw it from a distance, and hurried home to change her frock—until then she had quite forgotten that she owed Mrs. Starling a call.

"Now," said Jim, when he had made his salutations, "I can't answer for his good behaviour myself, you know, so I've sent the trap back for Judith; she'll keep him in order, and take him home when you've had enough of him."

This arrangement having received Cicely's approval, she made sundry overtures to Master Jim, and with little difficulty succeeded in inducing him to sit upon her knee. His novel surroundings had rather a subduing effect upon him at first; he stared about him with one finger in his mouth, and reassured himself occasionally by remarking, "Daddee not go 'way." But presently, when Miss Starling was introduced, he soon fell to hugging and kissing her, saying that he loved her; and when his feelings had in some measure been reciprocated, and kindly relations had been fully

established, he submitted willingly enough to be borne off to continue his flirtations elsewhere.

"That's like a child," said Jim. "Lavish all your care and affection on him; give him all he wants; do every mortal thing you can to please him; and when another child comes along, whom perhaps he has never seen in his life before, he will leave you without a moment's scruple, without even bidding you good-bye."

"Ah, but he'd soon be crying to come back to you again," said Cicely.

"Only when he found out that he wanted something which no one else could give him. A child's love is cupboard love; and I don't believe a child has any sense of gratitude whatever."

"Why, of course not," she replied, thinking probably that this strange man had given the subject more philosophical study than practical attention.

"And yet," he continued, "we never look for gratitude in children; we never want it. It would spoil the simplicity of their ideal faith in us. It is we who feel grateful to them; we must, we cannot help it, it is our nature."

"It is your nature to be very kind to them, Major Vraile, I think."

"Small merit in that, I fear. The difficulty is to be kind to those who—" he hesitated, but went on—"who illuse us, or misjudge, or disappoint us; a little child cannot do those things. Only intention wounds; a child has no intention. I have sometimes wondered whether it is the selfish gratification of knowing that children think no ill of us that makes us love them."

"Oh, no," cried Cicely, "I cannot allow that. I am

certain *I* never felt that, and pretty sure Tom never did."

He laughed. "Of course not," he said. "How should you? How should Tom, as you call him? But you have at least felt the soothing influence of a child's society; and is there not a certain amount of selfish gratification in the certainty that your child is always pleased to see you and talk to you and be with you?"

"I suppose there is," she said thoughtfully.

"A man whose best efforts and hardest work have brought him nothing but a cold word of approval from the outside world knows that he has only to go home and dance round the room once or twice for his child to be delighted with him; he knows that whatever happens—whether he succeeds or fails, whether his luck is good or bad, whether he makes mistakes or even does wrong—his child's faith in him will remain the same; and he knows that he can easily gain his child's praise when blame is being heaped upon him by every one else." He stopped suddenly, and looked rather confused. "But I did not come here to bore you with my reflections," he said; "let's talk of something else."

"You don't bore me a bit; I like it," said Cicely, naively. "It is a treat to hear some one talk of things outside St. Dogwells."

She had never before talked to him alone or for any length of time; but now, as they chatted on, she noticed a certain air of sincerity about him which somehow made his most trivial remarks appear worth listening to, and as he seemed to be interested in what she had to say in return—which no one else in St.

Dogwells ever was—they got on capitally. Sometimes he expressed himself, as he had done when talking of children, in a slow and rather pedantic way, as if carefully propounding the exact conclusion he had come to after deliberate thought; [at others there was a tinge of bitterness, though not of cynicism, in his remarks; but occasionally his sallow cheek would flush, his eyes would sparkle, and he would speak rapidly for a moment or two with something like enthusiasm. Such signs of a quick sympathy were, however, very few and always transitory; but they were not lost upon her, and the thought that he tried to suppress them, led her to believe that behind his rather melancholy demeanour there lay something out of the common which it would be rather interesting to reveal. It was when she happened to mention that Tom had gone out to get something in the town for Mr. Blythe, who was expected to return to St. Dogwells in a day or two, that he showed most animation.

“There are some people,” he exclaimed, “who will do nothing for themselves that gives them the least trouble if they can get any one else to do it for them. That husband of yours is an unselfish, good-natured boy, and Blythe, I am afraid, is rather given to over-driving willing horses. Ever since I’ve been here he has been either shirking his work altogether, or getting it done for him. I do like a man to be thorough; if anything is worth doing at all, it is worth doing well—work or play. It is thoroughness that makes a reliable man and a good officer.”

Cicely knew what he meant and looked unutterably happy; she felt terribly guilty, though, for having so

often told Tom that his good offices up at the fort were not properly appreciated.

"I hear," he continued, before she was able to get out a word, "that they are at last going to send us that other battery and detachment of Infantry which they have been talking of sending ever since the fort has been occupied, and that will lessen his work and give you both some companionship. It must be dreadfully dull for you."

"It is dull sometimes," she said, "but it must be worse for you up in that dreary old fort."

"I'm used to it, and have got to like it; but I suppose I shall have to clear out when these other people come."

"I wonder you stay here at all," she said.

"I wonder too, sometimes; but all places are pretty much the same to a man like me, and St. Dogwells seems to suit the boy."

The door opened very suddenly, and Tom Starling rushed into the room with—"I say, Cis, here's Mrs. Bompas and—oh! I beg pardon, Major; I did not know you were here."

Scarcely had Tom recovered from his embarrassment, when there was a ring at the bell, and Vraille rose to his feet showing, to Cicely's surprise, a sudden desire to be off. Judith would take the boy home, he said, and he was very much obliged to Mrs. Starling for——

The figure that followed Mrs. Bompas into the room arrested his attention, and he broke off in the middle of his polite little speech. He did not notice the fat widow's outstretched hand any more than he did her rosy blushes; he saw nothing but a face that brought

back the past with its crowd of remembrances; he heard nothing but a pleasant voice which said—"You need not trouble to introduce us, Mrs. Bompas; we have met before."

"You have not forgotten me then?" said the voice again, presently—low this time, and quite close to him.

He held a small gloved hand in his, and was gazing into a pair of hazel eyes that looked up at him earnestly. "No, Miss Dare," he said; "of course I have not forgotten you."

"I don't wonder at your being surprised to see me. It is an extraordinary coincidence—a very lucky one, for me. I received your letter soon after Mrs. Bompas—but let me explain from the beginning."

There was a buzz of voices; Cicely and Tom were both talking at once, perhaps to cover the awkwardness of the past few minutes. Mrs. Bompas was looking scarcely so self-satisfied as usual.

Edith Dare and James Vraile sat down in a corner side by side; and she explained.

CHAPTER IV.

GUILDHALL VILLA AND GOLDEN HILL.

HE had done a very gallant thing, and had been recommended for the Victoria Cross—so Tom Starling, and Cicely, and Mrs. Bompas understood from Edith Dare; but that was “once,” a long, long time ago, thousands of miles away, in a foreign land, during a war that had never interested anybody very much and was now well-nigh forgotten. The significance of the story had lost its effect, especially as he was not really a V.C.; and Mrs. Bompas, at any rate, was not very much impressed when she heard it.

“Dear me,” she said, “who’d have thought it? But every one is recommended for distinctions now-a-days. There’s that Colonel Smith of the Yeomanry, you know; he very nearly got a C.B., or something.”

It was very creditable, of course; but what was far more material to the issue just at present was that the London papers had lately published a full and authentic account of the military scandal, *Vraille v. Vraille and Rook*, which the local papers had copied faithfully.

Here, then, was a solution of the whole mystery concerning “that Major Vraille up at the fort,” and what mattered it that *she*, apparently, had been to blame? As usual, there were, of course, two sides to

every case, and as this particular case had been undefended, the world had only heard one side. It was an ugly business, and the St. Dogwells world was scandalized.

But what did brave Mrs. Bompas care? Here was an excellent opportunity of showing St. Dogwells that she, at least, was above such petty malice, and that, as she had taken "the military" under her wing, she was prepared to defend them against all comers. They and she were a cut above ordinary St. Dogwellites. Consequently, invitations to tea and dinner left Golden Hill and arrived at Guildhall Villa and Fort Gaunt as frequently as ever. But Vraille was in no humour for festivity, still less for Golden Hill festivity, and he "regretted his inability" upon the shallowest pretexts. For, by visiting Golden Hill, he ran the chance of meeting Miss Dare; and it seemed to him that throwing himself in her path meant perpetuating that feeling of obligation from which he would so gladly release her if he knew how. She had now more than once alluded to it in terms that had made his cheeks flush. His presence could not but be a sort of reminder of her indebtedness, since she would look at it in that light; and as, for some reason or other, he was anxious to spare her any awkwardness he could arising out of the situation, he avoided her altogether as the best means of doing so. But why was she there at all? What strange fortune had brought old Dare's daughter into the near surroundings of his life, as if to remind him of that part of it which he least wished to remember, and just when he had determined to put it behind him for evermore as a dream, an unreality?

Why, of all the advertisements which she must have read, had she pitched upon Mrs. Bompas's, not only to answer, but to choose for acceptance? Because Mrs. Bompas had offered very opportunely, as it happened, just such a situation as she was anxious to fill; and to fill quickly, and because the widow's terms and conditions had appeared more suitable than any others. It was all plain enough. No special fate had brought these things about—only pure chance. Chance ruled the destinies of man; life was a toss-up. Some men were lucky, others unlucky; he was one of the unlucky; he had tossed-up and lost. It was extraordinary how little interest he took now in the revolutions of Fortune's wheel, and how little he cared to calculate the causes that had brought this or that about—what did it matter? It *was*. But it did occur to him that he had answered Miss Dare's letter from St. Dogwells, and that she must have received that answer just about the time that her negotiations with Mrs. Bompas were going forward—whether before or after their final settlement, she had not said; so that he could readily account for the surprise of their meeting having been entirely on his side. And now that they had met, in spite of his indifference to the ordinary changes and developments of time and chance, he could not but recall the night he and Colonel Dare had spent together on the Afghan maidan. The old gentleman had made certain requests, and he, in turn, had made certain promises. Little as he thought then that his answers were more than the mere meaningless humourings of a man on the verge of imbecility, he was now morally bound by

those promises. Old Dare's babblings had not been all nonsense; the girl had been left in straits—sore straits for all he knew—and he had promised her father to be kind to her if they should ever meet. How had he kept his word?—by avoiding her. It was not right; he must put all other considerations upon one side and assure himself that there was nothing he could do to render her destitute condition less hard to bear. Now that his "business," as Uncle Ben termed it, was at last over, and the anxiety of it a thing to be forgotten as speedily as possible, he would put his good resolutions into effect.

An invitation to dinner from Mrs. Bompas lay upon his table. He sat down there and then wrote his acceptance.

As he was blotting the envelope, a little voice in the passage outside, cried, "P'ease may I come in?"

"Yes, come in, little chap," he shouted in answer; and added to himself, "Welcome as sunshine."

Little Jim came in.

"Daddee been eatin' his dinner," he said, looking at the table on which the remains of a frugal lunch were scattered about untidily.

Every day after lunch the boy paid his father the same visit. It was as much an institution as the romp they always had together in the evening before bedtime.

Vraille turned round in his chair and held out his arms. His little son came toddling into them. The victory had long since been won. There was no shyness on the child's part now; no doubt on the man's. Confidence had been gained and was freely

given. Perfect concord reigned ; perfect understanding existed.

"Well," said Jim, picking him up and setting him upon his knee, "and what did you see out walks this morning?" ("Walks" was the correct vernacular expression, so Jim understood.)

"Moo-cows ; an' gee-gees ; an' a gonkey—zes ; an' a ickle girly, Mis' 'Tarling' ickle girly, hink—an' Miss Dare!" Master Jim's linguistic performances had now reached a degree of proficiency that rendered conversation, in the shape of question and answer, possible—for a time.

"Oh, you saw Miss Dare, did you ? and what did she say to you ?"

"Boy got pitty eyes, an' pitty curls, an' pitty cheeks, an' pitty *nose*——"

"Come, come," interrupted Jim, "draw it mild. But never mind—what else did she say ?"

"Boy kissed Miss Dare. Miss Dare *clied*." This he said nodding his head in impressive affirmative.

"Cried ! did she cry ?"

"Zes—boy 'ants ter put on 'olly 'olear cloze an' march." He wriggled off Vraille's knee and toddled to a cupboard in the corner of the room.

With perfect gravity "the officer commanding troops, St. Dogwells," followed his son to the cupboard, unlocked it, and produced the diminutive jacket and forage-cap in which Master Jim was accustomed to be dressed when following his father in the solemn after-luncheon march round the room, which formed part of every day's customary programme of amusement.

It was ridiculous, absurd, nonsensical, to see a man

of Major Vraille's height and figure following a child of little Jim's proportions round and round a room, solemnly blowing a trumpet made of a roll of paper, and stepping high; but so it was—and he could make a much bigger fool of himself than that upon occasion. There was a want of dignity about him, as Colonel Taplow oftentimes remarked; and yet neither Colonel Taplow, nor any one else in St. Dogwells, had found him particularly approachable. On the contrary, the St. Dogwellites had long since learnt to let him alone as a dangerous man to interfere with; for many of them, Colonel Taplow among the number, had received snubs from him which they were quite unable to forget.

“Band 'top!” cried the boy.

Vraille instantly ceased his *too-tooings*.

“Halt—right turn—'tenshun—'tand 'till—march—band play 'gain.”

All these words of command Vraille obeyed implicitly, and the drill continued without intermission and with very little variation for the next quarter of an hour, when, without warning, the instructor suddenly complained of fatigue and boredom.

“Me tired, daddee,” he said; “take off 'olly 'olear cloze, p'ease; had 'nuff.”

“Well, I'm not sorry to hear that,” said Jim, bending down over the boy and stripping him of his fine feathers; “it's too hot for this sort of game. Come, let's get out your blocks and build houses.”

“Zes, p'ease,” said Master Jim. So the blocks were produced, and a magnificent edifice was soon in course of erection on the table. With great difficulty Jim

prevented the restless little hands from knocking it down prematurely, and at last they escaped, bent upon destruction.

"Just wait till I've put the roof on," said Jim—but too late. The handsome building, when within an ace of completion, tottered, fell—a ruin.

"Oh, those impatient little paws!" he cried, "will they never learn to wait? Is fulfilment a meaningless word to you, my boy? Is it our nature to destroy? Destruction is so easy, so pleasant, too. Well, well, wiser heads than yours have done the same."

The boy looked up at him with that old odd look of intense sagacity he always wore when trying unsuccessfully to understand what was beyond his comprehension.

"What a world of speculation there is in those bright eyes of yours! How hard they try to read my meaning in my own! They cannot, can they? No, not yet; but some day they will understand. Some day, my boy, I will tell you how your baby life built up what all the world could not pull down."

"Boy 'ants ter play horses now, daddee," was all the answer Jim received.

Playing horses was another rather heating game, but in spite of the state of the temperature, which was excessive that sultry afternoon, Vraille allowed himself to be driven about the room by a piece of string tied to his leg until the amusement for some reason—certainly not want of effort on his part—ceased to interest. When he had kicked and plunged and pranced himself into a profuse perspiration, he was requested to play at being a tunnel, which he did by going down upon

his hands and knees on the floor, and making an angular and not very picturesque archway of himself through which little Jim could crawl.

As the train emerged from the tunnel for about the twentieth time, the prostrate form of Mr. Wilkes, lying in a shady corner of the room, caused it to assume an upright position, an example quickly followed by the tunnel.

"Goggee doing his by-byes, daddee," said the train.

"Yes, poor goggee's tired; don't disturb him," said the tunnel.

Obedience is not a first instinct of nature; it is a social acquisition. Master Jim, not having as yet acquired anything from society's teaching, and very little from parental authority, proceeded without hesitation to disobey. Seizing the whip with which he had been lashing his father's legs while playing horses, he brought it down upon poor Mr. Wilkes's nose with a crack quite hard enough to put an end to the dog's slumbers in a single instant.

"Now that's very naughty of you, Jim," said Vraille, catching hold of the whip; "very naughty indeed. I told you not to touch him. No, I shan't let go. If you do it again, I shall take the whip away. I'm always telling you not to hit the poor dog."

"Goggee orful orty gog—orful orty. Boy *lash* oo, oo orty gog."

"It's you that's naughty, not the poor dog. Now pat him and tell him you're sorry."

"Boy orry, orty goggee," said Master Jim, only half repentant, but patting Mr. Wilkes's ugly head as he spoke.

"That's right. Now, you won't do it again, will you?"

"No, not do it 'gain—efer."

"If you do," said Jim, knowing full well how much reliance might be placed in his son's promises, "I shall certainly take the whip from you, and—and put you in the corner."

He turned away that the child might not see his smile. Put him in the corner! What a ridiculous form of correction! And yet he knew it was the punishment Judith administered for the graver class of Master Jim's offences. He hoped the boy would not commit himself again; for as it was part of his creed always to fulfil a promise, so it followed that he must carry out a threat. By never breaking his word to his child he hoped to inspire respect and enforce——

Crack!

"Very well then, I must do as I said.' Now, I shall put your whip away up here until you are a good boy again; and, as I said so, you must go into the corner."

He had no very definite idea how this punishment ought to be carried out; but the boy knew perfectly well, and of his own accord toddled off, merrily enough, to a vacant corner near the window, and stood in it with his back to the wall smiling at his father.

This would never do, and just as Jim was beginning to feel that the wind had been taken out of his sails, the boy remarked——

"Coming out now—'ood boy 'gain."

"No, no," said Jim, biting his lip; "this is not a game. You must stay where you are till you understand that you've been disobedient." So he placed a

chair in front of Master Jim, who for a time peered alternately over and under a rail in the back of it, saying, "Peep-bo, daddee!"

Vraille took no notice.

Presently the "Peep-bo!" ceased. Little Jim began to realize that there was no fun going forward, and that he was really in disgrace. The corners of his mouth drooped; his eyes closed; and his face became all puckers and dimples; his head fell backward, as his hands clutched the rail before him, and he burst into a torrent of contrite grief.

"Boo-hoo! P'ease, dad-dee de-ar—lem-me come out—boo-hoo!—oh, dear! oh, dear!—me orful orty—boy—'anter come out—'orry, daddee de-ar—boo-hoo! oh! oh!—daddee—de-ar dad-dee."

Jim could stand it no longer. Every wail seemed to cut like a knife into his heart. It was such a cruel thing for a great big man to cause a little bit of a boy such infinite distress—distress out of all proportion to the original offence—enough to expiate a murder.

"Well, I'll let you out now," he said, sitting on the chair before the culprit; "but do, *do* be good, and *don't* let me have to punish you again—I hate it, that's the truth."

"Ze-es," said the boy, his tears trickling down his cheeks and nose; but his dismal cries ceasing on the instant.

"What did you do naughty?"

"Dunno, daddee de-ar"—a sob—" 'ip goggee—hink." Oh, what was the good of punishing simplicity, in itself so utterly innocent? Where was the sense of it? He caught the child up in his arms and hugged him to

his heart—he, a man, who should have been a woman because of that very heart! He kissed him and wiped away his tears; he fondled him and talked to him in simple, silly language, trying to make him understand the difference between right and wrong, obedience and disobedience. He called the dog to them, and made the boy pat him and tell him over again that he was sorry for what he had done. Eventually he handed him over to Judith, asking her to get him ready for a drive in the pony-cart; and so ended Vraille's first attempt to enforce his son's obedience. But in all his softness and, if it must so be called, his weakmindedness, there remained one redeeming feature of determination. He refused, kindly but decidedly, to let little Jim play with his whip again that day. "That," as Judith said to herself while she was dressing the boy for his drive, "was the dear man all over."

The object of their drive was tea—tea with Mrs. Starling. Often since the day when Vraille had first taken his son to Guildhall Villa had the visit been repeated, and generally for a similar purpose. The children were little links that bound the interests of Dismal Jimmy, as Tom even now sometimes called him, to those of Cicely, Tom's wife, and were daily tending to draw them closer and closer together. Out of these common interests the intimacy had sprung; through them it had increased to something very like firm friendship, and James Vraille, though he persistently refused other invitations, was often to be found spending an afternoon at Guildhall Villa.

When the children had been banished to upper regions, and the expected arrival of fresh troops at

Fort Gaunt—a subject which just then was exciting St. Dogwells' interest—had been under discussion for some time, Vraille said—

“What bothers me is where to go. Go I must, for the fort will be full next week, and though of course I could still keep my quarters if I liked, I think it would be best to get the boy out of the way. Only yesterday I overheard Blythe say he hated having squealing brats about the place.”

“He's a horrid man,” ejaculated Cicely.

“It's only his way,” said Tom; “he didn't mean it.”

“Anyhow,” Jim pursued, “I'd better go; but the difficulty is to find a house. They are all either too large or too small.”

Tom and his wife looked at one another. He nodded to her, she to him, he frowned slightly and shook his head, and she, understanding from these signs that she was expected to act as spokeswoman, after some hesitation said rather nervously—

“Tom and I have been thinking, Major Vraille, that as there are a couple of rooms above ours in these lodgings furnished and unoccupied, if you continued to live at the fort, Judith and little Jim might, perhaps, be able to make themselves comfortable here.”

“By Jove,” he exclaimed gaily, “that's a capital idea. Where's your landlady? Let's have her up and make an inspection of the premises.” It was the Jim of former days who spoke, the Jim that used to be, with his quick impetuosity and ready adaptation to circumstances, the Jim unaccustomed to thought. It was the Jim, whom after-troubles had subdued, made diffident

and shy, retiring, fearful of intruding his melancholy self upon others, who continued—"But the boy would be a nuisance; he would disturb you."

"A nuisance!" cried Cicely. "Little Jim a nuisance!"

"And I should be running in and out all day, tramping up and down the stairs."

Tom laughed. "A little extra tramping won't be noticed much, I can tell you, with what goes on already."

It did not require much persuasion to induce Major Vraille to interview the landlady. These young people meant to be kind to him, and he felt their kindness all the more keenly for having so few friends in the world to turn to just then. Since he had decided that the boy must leave the fort, this was by far the best arrangement he could make; and the idea of having him under a friendly roof, with another child for a companion, and a kind, motherly little woman to take an interest in him, was an inducement strong enough to tempt him to accept the offer. But before closing with it he consulted Judith. She raised no objection. "Anywheres," she said; "it's all much the same to him an' me, so long as we're together like. And as the fort's to be no more to ourselves, but full of a lot of screeching young orficers, p'r'aps 'tis best to get out of it, and go to a house as we know is occupied by a lady—pretty nigh the only one in the place."

This being so, Mrs. Foresight and Master Jim were removed, bag and baggage, to the two spare rooms in Guildhall Villa, where Jim visited them day by day with the regularity of clock-work, but creeping up and

down the stairs so noiselessly that Cicely never knew when he came or went.

One day—it was the day of Mrs. Bompas's dinner party, when that good lady, whose visits latterly had been very frequent, would presumably be too much occupied with household cares to pay calls—Cicely went up to the room at the top of the house whence peals of childish laughter were proceeding, and tapped at the door. Vraille, with the boy in his arms and his neck-tie under one ear, opened it.

“You oblige me to catch you when I can,” she said, “and I shan't apologise. Why is it that, ever since the boy's been here, you have crept past my drawing-room door like a thief in the night instead of coming in and seeing one like a Christian—or a good Samaritan, rather?”

She understood from his answer that, although he had consented to occupy a portion of the house, it must still be considered as her own, and that her drawing-room was as sacred as ever against intrusion.

“Intrusion?”

“I am only *too* ready,” he laughed, “to accept invitations.”

“Accept one now, then,” she replied, laughing back at him as she tripped down the stairs.

“Judith!” he shouted. “Please come and take the boy.”

Judith appeared, but Master Jim flung his arms round his father's neck, buried his head in his shoulder and pleaded dismally—“Don't go 'way, daddee dear, 'top and play with boy; de-ar daddee—p'ease.”

Vraille looked over the yellow curls at Judith with a

remorseful expression on his face, which she seemed to understand. "It's just right it should be so, sir," she said; "I told yer it'd come—all in different ways."

"It hardly seems fair," he said to himself as he made his way down the stairs to the drawing-room.

When Tom presently came in, complaining of the heat, the conversation turned upon the weather. It was frightfully hot, almost unprecedented, and the long-continued drought was doing a deal of mischief. Every one was complaining, and it was even said that the cattle in the fields were dying of starvation; there was hardly a blade of green grass or a drop of water anywhere.

"Except at Golden Hill," said Tom; "Mrs. Bompas's cows never want; she has milk and butter and cream just as usual—so she says, and I believe her."

This remark caused Cicely to throw a quick glance in Vraille's direction. Far from seeming to be annoyed at Tom's rather disdainful reference to Mrs. Bompas, he laughed; and instead of allowing the subject to drop, pursued it, asking all manner of questions about the mode of life at Golden Hill. As he listened to Cicely's (and more especially to Tom's) answers, his face became graver and graver. Tom did not mince matters, but his wife tried to do so.

"And Miss Dare," he asked at last, "do you ever see her?"

Cicely saw her constantly, liked her very much, and often had a talk with her.

"Is she happy where she is, do you think? Is Mrs. Bompas kind to her?"

"Happy!" burst out Tom, without giving her a

chance to answer. "If the truth were known, she's jolly *happy*, I expect. What with those children and the servants, I should say any girl who hadn't a skin as thick as the sole of my boot would be absolutely wretched—" Cicely tried hard to catch his eye, but it was fixed on Vraille's attentive face—"I'd almost sooner see a sister of mine dead than governess in that house. Old Mother B. has had three since we've been here, and now she's started what she calls a companion. Companion! A nice sort of companion *she* is for a clever lady-like girl! Why, even Miss Meek couldn't stand it, and Miss Meek was not a patch on Miss Dare, was she, Cis?" He saw her danger-signals at last, stopped short, blushed, stammered, tried to explain that he held Mrs. Bompas in great respect, and made matters worse by excusing her follies on the plea of irresponsible silliness. The greater part of the after conversation he left to Cicely.

"Did I really call her old Mother B.?" he said afterwards. "Oh, Lord! Well, he took it pretty calmly anyhow, and it's my belief he don't care a snap of his fingers for her."

What he had said about the corn in Egypt at Golden Hill was, nevertheless, true, and as Mrs. Bompas seemed to take so great an interest in the lonely major, in spite of his misfortunes, perhaps the lonely major could not, after all, do better than console himself with the widow's purse, property and person, as every one said he assuredly would do in course of time. A man of his position, St. Dogwells argued, who first occupied quarters in a dismal fort, and then sent his belongings to lodgings in the heart of the town, instead of renting

a proper house of his own, did so under the stern necessity of economy ; and if, as it seemed, Golden Hill and all that appertained to it were to be had for the asking, surely it would not be long now before the necessary question was put.

It was a prize worth a poor man's winning. Everything at Golden Hill was fat and rich and prosperous. Its meadows were sweet and green and velvety ; its Alderney cows yielded the best milk ; its dairy the best cream and butter ; its cochin-chinas the best eggs. In the house the pile of the carpets was thick, the folds of the curtains heavy, and the furniture mahogany—except in the drawing-room, where the chairs and sofas had legs of ormolu and crimson seats and cushions. Specimens of filigree silver occupied prominent positions ; antimacassars were abundant ; but, except for a pile of music that stood by the piano, there was not a scrap of printed matter to be seen anywhere.

In this well-ordered drawing-room Mrs. Bompas, in pale blue satin, pearls and lace (Maltese, most of it, she said) received her guests, and to the sound of a gong marshalled them in to dinner—to Vraille falling the honour of taking, first his hostess across the hall, then the head of her table. Beside him sat Edith Dare.

As it was only a friendly little dinner party, Dr. Spill, the family physician, having been invited just to divide the Starlings and balance the table, the younger Bompases, Algernon and Gwendoline, took their accustomed seats between their mother and her "companion" and were cautioned in the usual way. "Now, you may

talk to one another," said Mrs. Bompas, "but if you are troublesome you will have to leave the room; so remember." Often had Jim heard that caution given under similar circumstances, never had he known it to have the least effect upon their behaviour.

"Do those young people," he asked Miss Dare, "always sit up to late dinner?"

"Always," she replied.

"And are they with you all day?"

"Nearly all day."

"Do you find them at all troublesome?"

"Very."

"And rather hard to manage, I expect?"

"I shall manage them in time."

The directness with which she answered his questions somewhat disconcerted him. He had come to the house for the express purpose of finding out whether those things which Tom had told him that afternoon were true—things which he had often before that imagined must be true; but if this Miss Dare were made of stuff sufficiently stern to cope successfully with them—if she were contented with her lot, what right had he to interfere? what right to put questions to her which might seem to be impertinent?

When Miss Dare next turned to correct some impropriety on the part of Master Algernon at Mrs. Bompas's request, he looked at her. Her face was rather pale, and just a little sad; her mouth and chin showed signs of innate determination, her eyes were large and fearless, her hands long and slim, well-shaped, and perhaps indicative of power—strength of will. That was not a womanly characteristic, according

to his ideas; and he had almost made up his mind to trouble his head about her no more, when it occurred to him that she had the prettiest wavy hair he had ever seen, and a charmingly graceful figure, just now set off to the fullest advantage by her black silk evening dress. But more than all, there was that caressing tone in her voice, which he felt he would like to hear again. So that he found himself watching her, and thinking that, plain as she was, there was something in her face, or her manner—or was it her voice?—that decidedly interested him; and this, he remembered, was the feeling that she had always inspired in him whenever they met.

Although he tried various topics, his attempts to draw her into conversation were all more or less frustrated by Master Algernon, who sat next her and plied her with questions whispered behind his hand.

“If you have anything to say,” she said to him at last, “say it out like a man and not as if you were ashamed to speak;” whereupon Mrs. Bompas frowned, and Algernon, who was nine years old, and resented correction before company, promptly replied—

“Sha’n’t, so there.”

The girl’s face flushed, and Vraille saw her slim fingers close tightly round the fan in her lap.

“Young cub,” muttered Jim between his teeth, flinging himself impatiently back in his chair.

She heard him, and looked up with a smile. “Don’t mind him,” she said softly; “I’m used to it.”

“No; you’re not,” returned Jim, almost rudely. “You’re not used to it. If you were, it would not matter so much.”

“Matter! I’ve heard you say, myself, that nothing matters.” She laughed, and he, for some reason or other, blushed; he had not overcome that bad habit even yet.

In spite of the number of courses and the variety of wines; in spite of the plate and the palm leaves, the hot-house flowers and Venetian glass, the dinner was not altogether a success conversationally. The conversation was general—very general indeed, varied by long pauses which the two smaller Bompases filled up with personal altercations. At a very early stage of the proceedings these young people had begun to show signs of restlessness and mutual disagreement, and as time went on they took less and less trouble to conceal their misunderstandings. At first Miss Gwendoline had seemed rather overpowered by the grandeur of her sage green silk frock and pink sash, and had been fairly silent; but as this apparent feeling

Mrs. Bompas constantly interrupting the thread of his discourse by whispering injunctions to Alfred the footman or administering reprimands to her son or daughter. She apologised to him after each of these breaks, and said "Yes?" with interrogative encouragement for him to proceed; but as he had by that time usually forgotten the drift of his remarks, the point of his story, or even what he had originally begun to say, poor Tom stumbled on with decreasing meaning and increasing irritability until he found himself lost in a maze of broken sentences.

"And how do you like St. Dogwells now, Mr. Starling?" she asked during a lull, and for at least the hundredth time since she had known him. She did not put the question in a way that showed the least desire to be informed, for she followed it up by pressing him to try another cutlet, but in a purely perfunctory and wholly disinterested fashion which seemed to call for no reply. He did reply, however, and said that he had not found St. Dogwells more wildly exciting lately than usual.

"It is rather dull," she admitted, turning towards her daughter. "Gweny dear, take your elbows off the table, and don't talk so loud; we can't hear ourselves speak."

"Not that *that* seems to signify much," muttered Jim to himself, looking at his table-napkin.

"But Mr. Brand's going to enliven us up next week, I hear," said Cicely, bending forward politely. "He has consented at last to deliver a lecture in the Town Hall—on the Scotch Reformation, I believe it is to be. Are you going?"

"Not I," Mrs. Bompas replied. "What do I care whether the Scotch are reformed or not? Stuff and nonsense!"

"Reformation should begin nearer home, you think?" asked Jim, for the first time since the commencement of dinner directly addressing his hostess.

"Certainly," said Mrs. Bompas, looking quite pleased at being thus consulted.

Tom caught Cicely's eye and laughed. Mrs. Bompas nervously asked him what the joke was; but he was saved the necessity of answering by Master Algernon, who, being detected by his mother in the act of helping himself to candied fruit from the dessert dish before him, was severely reprimanded and warned that if the offence were repeated, he should be sent straightway to bed. It was repeated a little later on, he was again warned, but he was not sent to bed.

And so the dinner dragged its weary length along; course succeeded course, until the last was reached, when Tom, the trusty Tom, *à propos* of nothing in particular, but for want of anything better to say, had recourse to his London paper as a fertile source of subject-matter, and made some spasmodic remarks on the day's news.

"I had such a squabble once with Smith's boy about my London paper," said Mrs. Bompas, with some show of animation, "about two years ago, now, and more. He said it was impossible to deliver it here before seven in the evening—such nonsense! I paid him out, though. I said I would not take it in at all, and I've never bought a paper of him since."

"You patronise St. Dogwells' print, then," said

Dr. Spill, brightening up, for he had some reputation in the town as an able letter-writer.

"Not I; I cannot stand those paltry little local papers," retorted Mrs. Bompas. She knew the doctor's failings, and thus mildly endeavoured to correct them by inference.

"But don't you like to know what is going on?" asked Tom.

"Oh, I know what's going on well enough," she said, shrewdly. "Algernon, if you do that again, Miss Dare shall take you straight off to bed."

Algernon did it again, Miss Dare sighed, Vraille rapped his knuckles impatiently on the table.

"Do you hear what I say, Algy?" Mrs. Bompas exclaimed, getting very red. "Don't let me have to speak to you again. Yes?" (turning again to Tom) "You were saying?"

"That there has been a terrible railway accident in America," said Tom, exasperated into sarcasm; "that there are some singularly interesting political speeches being made just now; that owing to the dry summer a ruinous rise in prices is expected; that there are some very serious complications on the Continent——"

"Are there?" she interrupted, but with neither question, surprise, exclamation, or even interest, in her tone, and her eye all the time fixed on her son.

"Which may lead to war."

"You won't have to go, will you?—Algernon!"

Master Bompas, who had been pricking his sister's elbow with his fork, desisted.

"Him!" he cried in derision, pointing the fork at Tom. "Him go! Rather not. Him and Major

Vraille ain't real soldiers, I know; they don't wear proper red coats, they don't, and they live in lodgings."

"Algernon!" vociferated Mrs. Bompas, her face aflame; "if you say another word, Miss Dare shall take you straight to bed. Now, you know I mean what I say."

"I shouldn't go, and she can't take me," replied Master Bompas, highly incensed at the indignity of being thus repeatedly threatened before strangers.

"Algy is a horrid boy," broke in Miss Gwendoline, resting both her elbows on the table to enable her the better to kick her brother's shins. "He's been stealing the fruit, he has, all the evening; do send him to bed, ma."

"Yah! yer little sneak; take that!" The slap he gave his sister's cheek resounded through the room, and a moment afterwards Miss Gwendoline was giving vent to a series of piercing shrieks, and vainly endeavouring to clutch her brother by the hair.

All eyes were in a moment fixed upon poor Mrs. Bompas. With her rested the responsibility of putting an end to this painful scene.

"Miss Dare," she shouted above the din, "take him to Harriet at once and tell her to put him to bed."

The boy sprang out of his chair and placed his back against the sideboard.

"If she comes near me," he screamed, "I'll kick her black and blue. Just let her try, that's all."

Edith Dare, with a quiet smile on her face, slowly rose from her seat. Vraille rose with her. Their eyes met.

"Allow me," he said; "the boy may hurt you."

"I am not afraid," she began; but he had already twisted his fingers into the lace collar about Master Algy's neck and was holding him at arm's length; where the kicks he aimed at his captor's legs were perfectly harmless.

"Where shall I take him?" asked Jim.

"This way, please," she replied, with strange courtesy; and before Mrs. Bompas or any one else had fully realised the situation, they were in the hall together with the writhing boy between them.

It was not long before they had handed him over to Harriet's charge, but by the time they had descended to the hall again, they found that the incident had brought the long dinner to an end at last.

As Jim held open the drawing-room door for her, and her rustling skirts swept past him, she inclined her head and said, "Thank you, Major Vraille; you have been very kind to me."

He had done nothing, no more than any other man in his place would have done; but the simple words were evidently intended as an expression of gratitude, really felt.

In the dining-room, Dr. Spill was enlarging on the dirt of the town, its want of proper sanitary arrangements in the way of drainage, the probability of disease following the long drought, and other similar matters which interested Jim so little that, after a time, he lighted a cigar and stepped through the open window on to the lawn. Tom and Dr. Spill followed his example, and continued the drainage question on a garden-seat, while Vraille roamed about.

A full harvest-moon looked down upon Golden Hill,

casting deep shadows upon the lawn. The night was still and rather sultry, but, after the heat of the room, the air seemed cool and refreshing. Mrs. Bompas was wailing out her customary after-dinner lament over *The Lost Chord*, and he wandered round the house toward the drawing-room to listen, but kept himself and his cigar well out of sight.

Presently the song ceased; there was a pause, and then another hand struck the keys with another touch, and another voice began to sing. He drew closer and closer to the window, and listened—now with all his ears.

Her hands, he had noticed, were long and slim, well-formed and nervous. He understood now; they were the hands of a musician. The song she was singing was new to him, but, whatever it was, it was a treat—a treat such as he had not enjoyed for years. It changed—changed imperceptibly, and he was listening to notes that seemed familiar. He came close up to the window and leant against the framework. He could hear the words, but he could not understand their meaning, for they were German. It all flashed upon him in an instant—the dinner-party in the Indian cantonment, the ball afterwards, the first seeds of doubt and distrust sown in his heart that night. He wished he could drag himself away out of hearing; it was a terribly sad song, and seemed to him far, far sadder now than it had done then. But he could only draw closer and closer, until by stretching out his hand, he could have touched the singer.

She sang on—like a full-throated thrush—unconscious of the earnest face behind her, unconscious of

the pleasure she was giving, of the pain she was inflicting. The soft notes died sadly and slowly away, and the song ended in a sob.

“Miss Dare.”

She turned.

“It is beautiful—beautiful. Did you know I was listening?”

“No, I had no idea—I did not think any one was listening.” She rose and came to the window, turning her head toward the far end of the room, where Mrs. Bompas, with her back to them, was talking in an impressive manner to Cicely. “I was alone—singing to myself, I thought. That song is a great favourite of mine.”

He looked into her face; it was a fearless, open, truthful face. “Are you fond of sad things, then? Is life not sad enough, that you must make it sadder? Life is so short, so full of misery, real misery—why make it more miserable still with—with fictitious sorrow? Or is it that you are unhappy yourself, and cannot help singing sadly?”

“It is hardly a case of unhappiness, is it?” she said, avoiding his question; “but there is pleasure in some kinds of pain.”

“And there is pain in nearly all forms of pleasure.”

They looked into one another’s eyes; neither of them spoke for a moment; both were thinking.

“Do you take pleasure in anything?” she asked at last.

“Certainly I do—in my little chap. He is a never-ending joy.”

“And do you find pain in your fondness——” she

stopped, for the first time since he had known her showing confusion.

“Great pain—sometimes; great pleasure always.”

It was but a step from the window to the gravel path; as it had been from the piano to the window. It had been but a step from boredom into interest; one more, for him, from interest into enthusiasm.

Of what use to such a man were a kind uncle's worldly admonitions, and a commanding officer's advice as to expediency? It was not wise, Uncle Ben had often told him, to let emotions and sympathies get the upper hand. It was not expedient to take Mrs. Bompas's companion out into the moonlight, under Mrs. Bompas's very nose. Over and over again had he taken himself to task for what he called the foolish impetuosity which had led him into so much trouble; often had he resolved to be henceforth a reserved, quiet, self-contained man, a man of few words, who never spoke without thought, or acted in a hurry. All this was forgotten; he had lost sight of the value of expediency as totally as he had, for the time being, of the letter this girl had once written him, and of the recent self-restraint of her manner. On the spur of the moment all his resolutions vanished. In the emotion of the moment all his former experience was as nothing. A simple little German song had been enough to bring back much of his lost enthusiasm; a plain girl, whose bearing towards him had been repellent rather than attractive, by the simple power of a sympathetic voice, had kindled again the light in his eyes which care had dimmed for some long time past.

It was not only that she listened—listened and

talked, often contradicting what he said; but these very contradictions, because they were always so keen and quick and appreciative of the subject, led him to talk on and on with increasing earnestness. Sometimes he stopped, pleading his point with his hands half-stretched out before her; sometimes he ran his fingers through his short grey hair with a dubious, "We don't know; we don't know!"

She could talk as Mrs. Starling and even Uncle Ben could not, so, at least, it seemed to him. She reminded him of Doctor Dick sometimes, and he told her so.

"That is a great compliment," she said; "I have heard you speak of Doctor Doyle as I have never heard you speak of any one else."

"He could *understand*," said Jim; "he had in him the things I lack. That is why we got on so well together; his nature, his temperament, his mind were all corrections of my own. We none of us can be perfect; but I believe that if each of us could find a mind that exactly counterbalanced the worst defects in its own, that supplied those parts of it which were missing, that answered and responded to it, I believe the two blended into one would be as near——" He broke off abruptly. "But I'm very enigmatical, and daresay I've been making an ass of myself. I mean something like this: There are some people we cannot talk to, some we cannot help talking to."

"I wish," she said very slowly, "that there were more people in the world who would make asses of themselves in the same way—people who thought—who *felt*."

They were walking towards the window. Mrs. ompas stood just inside it, and called to them. "Miss Dare," she said, "will you come in now, please; I want you to play an accompaniment for me."

They went in. The girl played while Mrs. Bompas sang, and sang her sweetest. But Jim quite forgot to say, "Thank you," when the song was finished. He had not heard a note of it; he had taken the step back—from a sort of fool's paradise into a sort of silly purgatory, where it was his business to smile at things that did not interest in the least. A moment before he—the real he—had been taken out of himself; now he was thrust back again to think and feel alone. Everything seemed vulgar and commonplace and deadly dull and stupid.

CHAPTER V.

TWO TEA-PARTIES.

TOM STARLING detested, he said, going to Golden Hill to tea; it was worse than going there to dinner, for in the afternoon there was no chance of hearing Miss Dare sing, and, according to Tom, Miss Dare's songs did in some measure make up for the dreariness of Mrs. Bompas's dinner parties. He was a good-natured fellow, however, and after much grumbling yielded to his wife's entreaties and consented to accompany her on a duty call after one of these dinners.

Tea at Golden Hill was no mere frivolous apology for a meal; it was a function, and a rich one. Mrs. Bompas liked hot cakes, muffins, and plenty of cream with her tea. In a lemon-coloured muslin, profusely stamped with floricultural effects, she sat behind her silver service—simpering, smiling, lisping and blushing—drinking and dispensing tea. As the Starlings looked at her they wondered whether she were at all anxious about her figure, and whether she knew that copious potations of cream were not likely to improve it. Apparently not. She seemed just as satisfied with her person as she was with everything else that was hers.

Tom was bemoaning his lengthened stay in St. Dogwells, and expressing a desire for a move. "I am used to a pillar-to-post existence," he said; "and though

being settled, as they call it, is all very well for a time, I must confess I like seeing fresh places."

"One gets tired of knocking about," said Mrs. Bompas in a superior tone. "I have had enough of it, goodness knows, and I am only too thankful to be quiet."

Her "knocking about," as the Starlings very well knew, had consisted in a periodical oscillation between St. Dogwells and Malta; but Cicely, bent on making herself agreeable, questioned her about her journeys. "And you must have seen Italy," she said at last; "I have often longed to see Italy before I die."

"Nothing to see," said Mrs. Bompas.

"What! nothing to see in Italy?" cried Tom. "Oh, come, Mrs. Bompas, that won't work; I suppose, though, it is not a patch on Golden Hill?"

"A patch? I don't quite——"

"I mean that, side by side with St. Dogwells, Italy would make a poor show?"

Mrs. Bompas did not know, but she knew that the Golden Hill milk—and away she went. She had a way of focussing the conversation on Mrs. Bompas, and unless Mrs. Bompas were discussed, conversation became vague and hypothetical—apt to stray to the tea-table and buttered buns. Golden Hill was part and parcel of Mrs. Bompas, for it was hers—her very own. She looked at the rest of the world through the large end of the telescope: everything else was far away and in miniature. But Golden Hill she could see with the naked eye; it was there, under her very nose, substantial, solid, an all-important reality; she knew all about it, and about it she liked to talk. She entered

into every recent detail in connection with Golden Hill produce categorically. "And, do you know," she said at last, lowering her voice, and glancing over her shoulder, "the hens have almost left off laying. It's a curious thing, but ever since I first trusted Miss Dare with the keys of the hen-house the eggs have become scarcer and scarcer every day."

"The drought," suggested Tom; "you can't lay or do anything else if you're thirsty."

"No, it's not the drought—something worse than that, I fear—Harriet and Alfred both noticed it."

"Noticed what?" asked Tom, rudely, and looking very angry.

"That the eggs began to disappear. They said that in one week there were something like four dozen short."

"Short of what?"—again from Tom.

"Short of what there used to be, of course."

"And do you suppose that Miss Dare could eat four dozen eggs in a week without your noticing it? What did she do with the shells?"

"Exactly," said Mrs. Bompas. "No; she did not eat them, she sold them."

"I don't believe it," exclaimed Tom—"absurd—ridiculous!"

"But Alfred said so—and Harriet."

"I would not believe a word they said, if I were you. It's monstrous; I——"

"But I put some marked eggs in a nest one night, just to see. The next morning—what do you think?—*they were gone.*"

"Without telling either Alfred or Harriet what you had done?" questioned the persistent Tom.

“Why, of course, I told them; or how——”

“Then that accounts for the milk in the cocoanut,” he remarked complacently, “and likewise for its hairy exterior.”

“I don’t understand,” Mrs. Bompas began; but whether she did or not mattered little, for just then her companion came into the room, and she said “Ahem!” loudly, as if something were tickling her throat.

The Starlings rose out of their chairs and greeted Miss Dare with an effusive show of courtesy, Tom especially shaking hands with her so warmly, and asking her how she was with such apparent anxiety to know, that she was surprised.

“I am very well, thank you,” she said, laughing; “but from your manner I should say you had been talking about me.”

The last part of this speech she made with her eyes fixed on her patroness, who blushed profusely and changed the conversation with as much tact as a horse shows which, after throwing his rider and treading on him, gallops to some spot a little further off and begins to graze.

“Seen anything of the Major lately?” she asked Cicely.

“We see him almost every day,” she replied. “He comes regularly every afternoon and stays with his boy until bedtime. Very often he spends an evening with us, too.”

She did not think it necessary to add that she and her husband worshipped the Major. He had made himself so popular at Guildhall Villa that they looked

upon him almost as one of the family, and missed him when he stayed away. He had befriended them in a hundred ways. The piano in the drawing-room, the sideboard in the dining-room, many of the pictures, books, nick-nacks in the house were presents from the Major, who in his unobtrusive way seemed to notice all that Guildhall Villa wanted and provided it—for the good of the community, as he said, but really for Tom's or Cicely's exclusive use. She did not think it necessary to explain that he was perpetually asking questions about Edith Dare, making plans for getting her to the house, or arranging pleasure parties in which he thought she could take part. All this she kept to herself, and simply remarked that he was a dear, good fellow.

"Rather a sawny, isn't he, though?" said Mrs. Bompas.

"Yes," said Tom excitedly, "he is a sawny. He has reformed the battery and made it into one of the best in the service; he has sent all the meddlers who used to interfere with him about their business; he has had some whacking big rows with the authorities and won every case he has taken up; he works like a horse; and if every one under him don't work too, he wants to know the reason why; and he's got a devilish awkward way of putting the question to some of 'em. He's an awful sawny, perhaps; but he's the pluckiest chap I ever met, and I only hope I may never have to serve under a worse C. O."

Miss Dare looked across the room at Tom.

"And yet," she said, "he is gentleness itself."

"Gentle!" cried Cicely, "you should see him with that child of his."

"I have," replied Miss Dare shortly, and she lowered her eyes again to the work in her lap.

"It is absurd, all the same," said Mrs. Bompas, "for a man of his age to go about with a baby as if he were a nurse; and I can't help thinking there must be something weak about him."

"He was strong enough," retorted Cicely quickly, "to keep his head in a panic, and fight single-handed against a crowd."

"He was strong enough," said Edith Dare, rising, and moving towards the window, out of which she looked as she went on speaking, "to do a very brave and a very generous thing, and strong enough to forget that he had done it. He is strong enough now," she continued, turning to Cicely and speaking with flashing eyes and clenched hands, "to be able to lift himself high above the motives of this miserable petty place in which he lives, for the sake, I believe, of his boy, and to stand alone, a giant among pigmies; noble enough to forgive them their littleness, grand enough not to despise them, and far too big a man to care a rush what ordinary people think."

She turned to the window again and looked out upon the lawn. They could not see her face.

Had Mrs. Bompas been able to understand the full significance of what was said, her companion would have run small chance of remaining her companion after the end of the current quarter. But she did not understand; she only grasped the facts that Miss Dare was quite unlike any of her predecessors in the way of openness of speech, and that on the present occasion she had expressed herself in very glowing terms about a

gentleman in whom she herself took a certain interest: To hide this interest she twisted the diamond rings on her fat fingers round and round, apparently intent on making them sparkle, and in a tone of all the indifference she could muster, replied—

“Dear me, Miss Dare, I had no idea you admired him so much;” and, by way of showing her general disregard of the subject in her use of the terms she applied to it, continued—“This thing he did was while he was serving in some non-competent part of the army, too, was it not?—so Colonel Taplow tells me at least.”

“Let old Taplow cackle as he likes about what he doesn’t understand,” cried Tom, “he can’t change a *non-combatant* into a *non-competent*, Mrs. Bompas.”

James Vraille continued to be the subject of debate for some time. He was dull, Mrs. Bompas said; Cicely, on the contrary, assured her that he could be brilliant on occasion. He was poor company; he was a clever talker. He was morose and sullen; he was sociably inclined, and fond of a chat. He talked too little; there was no stopping him when he once began; he was even witty and amusing. He was a hundred and fifty things he was not, and was not almost everything he was. The Starlings and Mrs. Bompas were prejudiced each in separate ways; the former exaggerating his virtues, the latter, from motives of modesty perhaps, pointing out his faults and foibles with a keen appreciation of their number. The girl at the window alone said nothing.

“And what do you think, Miss Dare?” Cicely asked at last.

"I think," Edith replied slowly, "that he is the saddest man I have ever met in my life."

This, then, was the light in which Edith Dare regarded him—the man about whom she had heard so much, and, latterly, seen so often; the man whom all St. Dogwells cordially detested, whom the Starlings called "excellent company, and a dear, good fellow," and whom Mrs. Bompas hoped to bring to her feet with a declaration.

The widow's early confessions, made while her companion was yet a "new broom," and consequently a hot favourite, had doubtless been the cause of Miss Dare's frigidity of manner when she first met him at dinner. He was "making up" to her mistress—in which words her mistress had described Vraille's attitude towards herself—and any man, however great a hero in the past, who could, for the sake of money, "make up" to such a woman, must have lost all sense of self-respect in the present. Until then, perhaps, she had gradually grown almost to despise him; but time had since given her many opportunities of judging for herself, and she had formed her own conclusions both as regarded his "intentions" and his personal character and disposition.

He had committed many enormities. He had quarrelled with the town commissioners, and defied the town council; he had snubbed the people's pride, the worthy Taplow; he had even flouted the great militia colonel himself on the magisterial bench; he had run the gauntlet of the local press in consequence—and he was the saddest man she had ever known. Her opinion, summed up in these few words, differed

from the opinions held by those who thought they knew and understood him best; it differed from the Starlings' estimation, from Mrs. Foresight's, Mrs. Bompas's; it even differed from Uncle Ben's. Were all of them only half right? Had she alone succeeded in touching a key-note which they, with the best endeavours and intentions to strike correctly, had failed to strike at all? Possibly in her heart she felt many things of which she could not speak, but when asked she said she found him the saddest man she had ever known.

Right or wrong, she had hit upon a time which was perhaps the happiest that Jim had known in all his life before. Comparatively speaking he was very happy. Life was beginning to look bright again—very bright and sunny. All was going well with him. He had recently been complimented on his work; he had won all his local battles and was reaping the fruits of them; he was daily associating with a pair of young people whom he liked, and whom he had many opportunities of serving; his child was well and strong, his associates at the fort amused, if they did not very much interest him; and his hours of work and play, duty and pleasure, doled out in fair proportions, occupied his time pleasantly enough. There was but one small cloud in the serene sky of his contentment: Uncle Ben's health had failed him more and more, until he had become to a certain extent an invalid; but then he had gone to the south of France, where he would be certain, so the doctors said, to recover. Altogether, as the autumn advanced, Jim became a changed and happier man.

"My luck," he said one day to Cicely Starling, "has not been particularly good through life, you know, but now I do really believe it is on the turn."

Astute old Jim! He thought to deceive little Mrs. Starling, as he tried to deceive himself, by talking gaily of his battery, his child, the horses he was going to buy, the hunting he was going to do, and so forth, and so lead her to believe, as he led himself to believe, that in these simple pleasures he suddenly took delight, and that in them lay his new-found happiness. Cicely knew better, or, at least, thought she did.

"If," she said to Tom, "we could only fit out the Major with a really nice wife, who would be kind to him, and look after him and his boy, and try to understand him, what a thoroughly good fellow we could make of him."

"If pigs had wings, Cis, perhaps they would fly," Tom replied. "Jimmy isn't the sort of chap to marry—again."

However, Cicely, with true womanly instinct, as well as true womanly propensity (all women like match-making, though few understand how to procure the proper ingredients), waylaid Edith Dare on all occasions, and brought her, with or against her will, to Guildhall Villa, where, as Tom remarked, the Major talked "literature, science, politics, and art with her, till all was blue," and seemed to enjoy himself.

Sly old Jim!

He knew of a little sandy cove on the sea-shore among the rocks where Mrs. Bompas was in the habit of sending her children to "paddle;" he knew, moreover, that

Harriet was generally too busy in the house to take the young Bompases herself, and that the duty usually fell to Miss Dare; he knew that salt water was supposed to be good for young legs, and he saw no reason why little Jim should not paddle as well as other children. So he very often took little Jim with him to that sandy cove in the cool of the evening to initiate him into the mysteries and delights of paddling.

This treat, which had almost superseded the "poneecart," was afforded Master Jim whenever the weather would allow; he and Miss Starling would be taken by Judith in the pony-cart to the top of the cliffs, where it was Vraille's custom to meet them and carry them down to the beach in his arms. Sometimes Cicely, sometimes Tom, often both of them, would join the party, and they would all pic-nic among the rocks taking the appurtenances of tea with them.

The summer was far advanced, and the long-looked-for rain had been pouring down incessantly for ten long days—during which little Jim had asked repeatedly to be taken for "a pallel in er sea," but had necessarily been confined to the house—when the clouds suddenly dispersed, the sky again became a canopy of blue, and early one morning the sun blazed forth the announcement, through the window blinds of Jim's barrack-room, that the day had come at last for an excursion to the cove.

The afternoon fulfilled the morning's promise, and off went Jim, as soon as his work was done, to make his arrangements, fully as eager for the treat as he knew his son would be.

True to time, he met the little party at the top of

the cliff and dexterously picked the children out of the pony-cart.

"Come on, old boy," he cried; "come on, little Cis; we'll all paddle to our hearts' content to-day. Got the tea, Judith? That's the style. You bring along the kettle and basket; I'll see to the chicks. Now then," he shouted, when he had told his man-servant, who was in attendance, the time to bring the pony-cart back for them; "now then; off we go!" And with a child upon each arm he picked his way down the zig-zag path leading to the beach, crying—"Gee-up, old hoss; gently over the stones. Here we go, Cis; here we go, Jim, my bonny boy; hurray for a pallell and a jolly tea!" as gaily as any idiotic Major in her Majesty's land forces ever spoke in the course of a long service on the active, half-pay, and retired lists, taken all together.

"Take off me oos an' 'ocks, daddee," commanded little Jim peremptorily, as he took a violent seat on the shingle.

"Take off me oos an' 'ockings, p'ease, Mage-rail," lisped Miss Cissy as she leant carefully back against a rock.

"Boys and girls," said Jim to himself, kneeling in the sand, regardless of his "nice new blue serge suit," as Cicely Starling had called it; "boys and girls—girls first, boys afterwards; socks and stockings; early disregard of personal appearance, and early respect for dress; signs of carelessness and symptoms of vanity; boys and girls—all the world over, just the same. As it was in the beginning, so, I suppose, it will go on and on, to the end of time—if time has an end. There, away you go!"

"Come 'long, ickle Cis; take me hand, me-lead oo."

"Just as I said," Jim soliloquised, as he watched the tiny pair totter hand in hand towards the Ocean; "human nature beginning all over again where human nature left off; we shall never get any further. Man takes the lead even in infancy; it is his prerogative. Nature has imbued him with the instinct: woman yields and submits to his guidance, or should do so according to all tradition. But then, according to tradition it is *she* who leads *him*—to a Fall."

"Iz oo comin' too, daddee?" asked little Jim, looking round.

"Yes, I'm coming, old chap;" and he followed Judith and the children down to the water's edge.

But this was not enough for the boy. "Take off *ore* oos an' 'ocks, too," he said, "an' come an' pallell in er boofful sea wiz me an' ickle Cis."

"All right," said Jim; "I'll come to-morrow. I've got a bone in my leg to-day."

This amply satisfied the child, who went on digging and splashing and admonishing little Cicely under the superintendence of Judith and paid no further attention to his unfortunate father—cut off from a similar enjoyment by the bone in his leg.

"He is what he is," thought Vraille, who always evinced an inclination to moralize when he looked at the sea; "he enjoys the sight of a pebble, a piece of seaweed, a bucket and spade, and all the finite things of childhood. And I, a man, look upon the sky and the sea and speculate on infinity—feel the infinity within myself, know that it is in him as well, and that he too one day will feel it—and wonder."

"Oh, the end of all philosophy," he said aloud, "leads nowhere—or, at least, only back to the same starting-point. We look out on the world and see that it is wonderful—too wonderful for us to understand, and we are driven back on a Primary Cause—we have to confess to ourselves we know nothing at all about it. Let us enjoy and be content. Nature is beautiful; let us, at least, not spoil her handiwork with what we call civilisation!"

"You forget," said a gentle voice behind him, "that Nature is cruel and red-handed"—he turned sharply and confronted Mrs. Bompas's companion—"and is continually waging a pitiless war against life. Civilisation helps us to fight her."

Yes; for the moment, perhaps, he had forgotten it.

Her words were hard words, but her voice as she spoke them was soft and kind, and very sweet to listen to, Jim thought. It both soothed and caressed him; it urged him to answer; it excited his interest; it drew him out of himself; and yet it made him feel, somehow, that were he silent he would still be understood. For a moment or two he was silent as he stood looking at her, but not with the feeling that his thoughts were being read. She was dressed in a loose grey cotton gown with a black band round her slim waist, and he felt half inclined to tell her that beauty meant simplicity, but thought that such a speech might be personal and rude. Her arms hung loosely by her side, and her hands, gloveless and ringless, clasped the ends of a child's wooden spade. Form, he nearly said, but restrained himself, needs no ornament. Then he looked into her face; it was a plain, honest, square

face, but what was it that prevented it from being an ordinary face? The breeze caught her hair, and a wavy tress floated out into the air from under her black straw hat. His eyes followed its flutterings, and as he was trying to make up his mind whether he would call its colour dark or light, she caught it in her hand, and, with a little laugh, tucked it behind her ear. And just then Gwendoline Bompas came running towards them with a little pink sea-shell in her hand. Edith Dare bent her head to look. He lost sight of the ear; but he could see the shell.

"You have won that girl's confidence," he said abruptly, when Gwendoline had joined her brother Algernon.

"I think so," she replied.

"And you have bridled that brute of a boy"—he was looking at the children, who were divesting themselves of their shoes and stockings quietly and amicably enough. He had often remarked the growing change in their behaviour to the Starlings, but never before to Edith Dare. "How did you do it?" he went on; "you said you would, I remember, and you seem to have succeeded. Is there a charm about you?—tell me, is there a charm about you which can change natures and characters? I do not wish to be rude, but, do you know, I think there is."

"You think a great deal more than you ought," she replied lightly; "you are always thinking."

"Am I?" he said simply; "perhaps I am. Freedom of thought is a blessing, I suppose; but it is a curse too. Mind is a fatal gift, always tearing you in opposite directions—backward with regret, forward

with apprehension ; that is, the mature mind that feels so much more than it knows. Look at those little children ; if we all had freedom of speech as well, what a very different place this world would be ! ”

“ But, surely, we do have it. ”

“ I don’t, anyway, Miss Edith ; generally I am tongue-tied, or feel the truth of the trite saying that speech was given us to conceal our thoughts. ” Neither he nor she seemed to notice the transition from “ Miss Dare ” to “ Miss Edith. ” “ But perhaps the time will come, ” he went on thoughtfully, “ when man will learn that his highest claim to honour is the possession of the power to speak aloud what is in him. ”

“ You mean, ” she said, looking at him earnestly, “ that you very seldom get a chance of saying what you really think ? ”

“ Or of talking about what really interests me—but, somehow, you, a comparative stranger, seem to have skimmed the cream of my thoughts. How have you done it ? ” he asked, laughing.

The children were busily and happily engaged making themselves and their clothes wet and dirty ; Judith was superintending. Jim and Edith Dare, with their minds free from the care of responsibility, soon became absorbed in one another’s conversation. Whenever they met it was the same ; they fell naturally into the discussion of subjects they would not have dreamed of broaching in other society.

She, seated on a low ledge of rock, looked down upon the grey-haired man lying at her feet ; he, with his head bare and his earnest face upturned to hers, talked on and on unrestrainedly.

"No amount of talking," she said with a smile, "will ever answer the question, 'What is life?'"

"And no amount of thinking," he replied, "will lead us a step nearer to truth. Life is, and must always remain, a muddle and a puddle. We cannot understand it. We cannot see to the bottom of it. It is finite, and yet infinite; it is simple and yet inexplicably complex." He paused awhile, as if uncertain whether to proceed, and then with a sort of sudden determination went on, "I thought when I first came to this place that I had got into the most ridiculous and at the same time the most detestable corner of the globe in which a man could qualify for a lunatic asylum. I had no one to talk to, and nothing to do but to think. I was miserable—miserable. You said just now that I thought too much. There was a time when thought was rapidly leading me into an all-round disbelief in everything. I went on arguing and arguing with myself, until I had well-nigh argued away faith and hope, and, I may as well add, charity. Some of my disbeliefs shocked and staggered me, and I saw that that way madness lay. I have come out of that struggle—as I went in—ignorant and alone, but, I hope, with my soul cleansed. The great questions—*Why? Whence? Whither?*—came upon me late in life, perhaps, but when they did, they struck me with their full force." You know my story; you know how I was deceived and left. It was not that—hundreds of men have had harder things to bear—no, it was not that; it was the feeling of isolation, of utter solitude. Look at that boy. Do you wonder why I love him? He saved me from despair; and now, it seems, all tha

I had lost—energy, vitality, hope, ambition even—are revived in him—they are all centred in him. Contemptible as this sleepy hollow of a place may be, I do not so much mind it now. After all, it is only the world in miniature.”

“We are automata,” she said; “our customs soon become crystallised into habits. That is the pity of it. You are wasted here, but have ceased to mind it.”

“Wasted! My whole life would have been wasted but for him. It has been full of mistakes as it is—full of regret. It is my nature to repent. I spend half my time repenting what I do in the other half. It is very hard, I think, to be a happy man, and I am afraid I was never intended to be one.”

“No; only fools are happy; only fools who never think—who are incapable of thought—really enjoy life. I believe that. We have each our own burdens; but do not some of us take such infinite pains to strap them on to our backs that nothing will loose them?”

“Ah! That is one of the great mysteries of being—that responsibility of the inner self. Why are we so created? Why is life, quite apart from life’s surroundings and accessories, made so hard for some, so easy for others? Sheep have no inner sheep.”

“And most men are but sheep, following one another. You should rejoice in being able to strike out a line of your own.”

“But am I able? And if I am, and get the praise of men for it, or their censure, that makes no difference to *me*. It is part of my creed that the leopard cannot change his spots; and a man cannot alter his character.

As a certain 'ring' is the property of certain metals when struck, so, I suppose, is a certain specific kind of response the tribute we each pay under the varying but definite tests applied by the circumstances of our lives from day to day. Some things anger me and I show anger; some things melt me to pity, and I show pity; many—oh, very many things that I see and hear fill me with contempt: the contempt I feel for the people I meet makes me ashamed of myself. But through all these phases the I—that I which I alone seem to know—never really alters. It is the I that, for one thing, lacks self-confidence."

"I don't believe it," she exclaimed; "I mean I don't believe it is self-confidence you lack, but self-conceit. It is only through a long course of morbid introspection that you have come to think like this. All you want is congenial companionship, encouragement, sympathy. You are as strong—aye, stronger far than your fellow-men."

"Work is what I want, hard work."

"Yes, work, and a little hope. And things are fairly well balanced in that way; hope comes quickest to those who most readily despond."

He did not answer, but looked up at her quickly. Her face was turned away, and she was intent on the pattern she was drawing on the sand with the wooden spade she held. Her speech, then, meant nothing; and after gazing at her for some time in silence, he withdrew his eyes.

"It is the loneliness of it all," he said.

"Yes, it is the loneliness of it all," she repeated, bending forward and resting her arms upon her knees.

It is the loneliness of it all." Her voice was low and full of sadness.

"That is like me," he exclaimed excitedly, "like my selfishness. Here have I been talking away about myself when I might have known that your life is probably ten times more lonely than my own. Perhaps you have no kind friends—no Uncle Ben to turn to; perhaps you have never known a Doctor Dick. Poor Miss Dare, you have not even a little Jim."

"In all my lifetime, Major Vraille, I have never had the sympathy, the kindness, the consideration, the goodness you have shown me in the last few months."

Then she told him her simple story, shortly—a commonplace story of inappreciation at home, dulness outside of home; a life of seeming comfort and real indigence, ending in absolute poverty and dependence. "I have no relations," she concluded, "in a position to provide for me, even if I could bring myself to live upon charity. I had a chance once of becoming a concert singer, but I refused it. In that way I could have earned money, and independence of a sort, but I dreaded the publicity, and so took to teaching children and 'companioning' old ladies."

"And pure chance brought you here?"

She hesitated a moment before she answered, "Yes, of course, pure chance."

Then both were silent.

The breeze carried the sounds of merry little voices along with it and bore them on and away, unnoticed—neither spoke. It caught the vagrant tress of Edith's hair again and toyed with it; but this time

Jim did not see its wavy flutterings; he was looking out to sea; it whispered to them both, but neither seemed to heed.

Then, speaking slowly, he said, more to himself than to her—"It began from a sense of duty; little did I think it would end in so much pleasure. But you must go away from this place. I have seen enough to convince me that life at Golden Hill must be intolerable."

"No, no," she interrupted quickly. "I don't wish to leave. I am happy enough, believe me."

"I cannot believe you; you are the sort of woman who would suffer martyrdom in silence. One day, some time ago now"—he lowered his voice and spoke very softly—"a little child, a child who knows no falsehood or exaggeration, told me that he had seen—had seen Miss Dare cry. Very few people, I think, have seen that."

She did not answer.

"Forgive me," he went on, "for saying what I have said; but I cannot bear—— We must try and get you away. You are offended?" he said quickly, looking up; "I am sorry."

"No, no—anything but that. What can I say? How am I to thank you for this interest in me? Why should you take any?"

"Because I have never met any one——" And there he stopped, biting his lip, and abruptly added—"but all that's neither here nor there." (Surely, as Lucy in days gone by had often enough remarked, he knew nothing of flirtation, and had an awkward manner with women.)

"Your natural kindliness of heart leads you to exaggerate," she said. "My troubles are insignificant, and diminishing every day. The children are not really vicious, no children are."

"I believe that," said Jim reverentially.

"And little Jim must have caught me in a fit of annoyance, or a pet."

"Were you in a pet, then, when you met him accidentally in the street and bent over his perambulator to speak to him?"

"I forget," she said, laughing; "very possibly I was."

"I don't believe it. I only believe you are too proud to confess yourself unhappy. Apart from the children, those horrible servants, and Mrs. Bompas herself——"

Edith Dare smiled. "She is only very, very silly," she said.

"But that is the danger! Silly, foolish people work more mischief in the world than out-and-out knaves; though I believe," he continued impressively, "that if the consequences of our folly could be photographed in one picture, the most thoughtless of us would be staggered. It is the risk of living with such a woman that I would wish you to avoid."

"Not yet," she answered; "not just yet."

"Do not, however, run away with the false impression that I hate these people, or would wish them ill. Sincerely, I think it is only pity I feel for them. They cannot help the manufacture of their brains any more than they can that of their legs. We are forced, out of pity, to tolerate, but we are not obliged to live with

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them. You must not continue to live where you are ; it is not right. You must go."

"Not yet," she repeated ; "not just yet."

Mrs. Bompas was continually confiding in her ; Mrs. Bompas hardly allowed a day to pass without telling her of some fresh attention paid by Major Vraille, of some fresh indication of his infatuation. She had to listen. And now for the first time she heard, although she had long ago inferred, the true state of Major Vraille's feelings.

But others, who were not so quick at drawing inferences, and who, moreover, had not been honoured with his confidence, looked down upon the picnic party from the road overhead, and drew their own conclusions from what they saw.

"I wonder whether Mrs. Bompas has any idea of what is going on ?" said Mrs. Taplow.

"None in the world, I'll be bound !" replied the Colonel.

They watched the pair for some little time intently, taking in every detail, and only desisted when they heard footsteps coming along the road and saw the Starlings approaching the zig-zag path down to the cove.

"Hallo, Starling !" shouted the Colonel airily, "going to find the children, eh ? Here they are, all down here, and Miss Dare and Major with them. About time you came, I think. Good night !"

When Jim presently caught sight of the Starlings descending the zig-zag path, he did not look in the least embarrassed, but hailed them with a glad shout. Then, turning to Edith Dare he said, "I promised your father I would befriend you if I

could. Will you promise me, in turn, that you will let me know at once if you are in need of help? I am afraid you are unhappy, though you will not admit it. You say you do not wish to leave Mrs. Bompas yet; when, in time, you do wish to do so will you tell me?"

"Yes," she said, as the Starlings came up to them, "I will—I promise."

It was a happy day for "poor old Jimmy," as Tom sometimes called his Major. All was going well with him; all was as it should be. He made himself useful in handing round tea-cups and plates; he smiled contentedly upon every one and everything; he stroked his son's curly head and fed him with bread and butter; he leaned forward politely towards Miss Edith Dare whenever she made a remark, which "inclinations" Cicely's quick eye noticed.

The children went back to the fascinating sea for a last dabble in it; Judith followed them; Jim's eyes followed her.

"A good woman—a really good woman," he said, catching Edith's glance.

"Even Mrs. Bompas calls her a 'respectable creature,'" said Cicely mischievously. She liked, as she said, to draw the Major out.

"Some words of approbation are insults!" he burst out. "Respectable! Mrs. Bompas should never try to praise; she does not understand the meaning of praise—some people don't. Respectable! A selfless woman, the ideal of what is most beautiful in feminine nature—a woman raised as high above the rich lady as the eagle in the air above the bat in the barn—a jewel

compared to a flagstone, excepting the usefulness of the flagstone. Respectable—bah! It is part of the hypocrisy of this canting age. I hate the word respectability!”

They “drew him out” to good purpose for the next half-hour. With his long legs stretched out before him, a pipe in his mouth, his back against a rock, he descanted upon many subjects, great and small, trivial and serious, showing—to those who understood him—his contentment with his surroundings in his enthusiasm of speech. No one but Edith Dare cared to answer him.

“You have power, Major Vraille,” she said at length; “do you not feel it in yourself, and the responsibility of it?”

“I?”—and he blushed. Yes, that was what he had half felt sometimes, but had supposed that the feeling was due to conceit or vanity. Now, for the first time in his life, some one accused him—it seemed like an accusation—of having a gift which he never used. “Have I power?”—the others were not listening—“Is that so? Sometimes I have thought it—and then that little child has smiled upon me and made me feel my impotence. But it must be so. You, too, have power; definite power in your art. Mine, if I have any, is latent; it is like steam in a boiler without a safety-valve, surging up and bubbling and seething within me, struggling to find vent, forced back upon itself, useless. Oh, if before the end I might be allowed to build up some monument that would remain in the hereafter to prove—not my worth; indeed not that—but my efforts to strive in the right

direction. There comes an end, and we are forgotten. We pass away out of sight, and leave nothing behind. For what purpose has it all been? If there be power in me, then God grant that I may be allowed to use it to some purpose—such as making many others happy. But see, whom have I, with my weak, selfish nature, to make happy—only that little child. And he, as he grows older and older, gains strength and vigour, shoots up from the baby into the boy, from the boy into the man, lessens with each advancing day my hold upon him; severs himself more and more from my control; learns to beat out his own path—as he must do, poor little fellow—and eventually becomes another such as I am, to begin where I left off. Oh, that he could remain the baby that he is until I die!”

“A terrible prayer,” she replied softly.

Ah, a terrible prayer indeed! He had sunk (or risen?) from a condition of active ambition to one of hazy doubt and speculation. The pomp and vanity of war; the glitter and sparkle and dash of his profession, with its thrust and push, its “one-against-all” struggle for advancement, or advertisement, had long since faded from that picture of perfection he had painted on his imagination when a boy. Only the sense of *duty* remained; the strong, earnest desire to carry out what he felt was right, to defeat what he conceived to be wrong. He knew himself to be an impossible man—a dreamer, a useless member of society; he knew that were he asked to define his idea of the acme of happiness, he could only reply, “sympathy.” Were he called upon to epitomise his hope in the present,

and his ambition in the future, the cry would go up from his heart of hearts, "My boy, my boy!"

The world and society would be better off if such men were not. They are a nuisance; they are no good—only a constant source of anxiety to their friends, if they have any, and a perpetual trouble to themselves. But they do exist, though they cannot be said to live—for they understand life too well in the knowledge of their utter ignorance of its mysteries, in the too-ready perception of its frauds, the contempt for its frivolities, to *live*—and they struggle on, never advancing, never succeeding; tossed from one sphere of society into another, unrecognised in any; battered by the world's blows, which make serious impressions on them; at last, travel-stained and way-worn, to succumb, when society—with a sigh—exclaims, "And a good thing too!"

Looming clouds broke up the little party, and scattered it in several directions. Jim sent Judith on in the pony-cart with the children; Tom and Cicely, he and Mr. Wilkes, followed. The master was as silent as the dog. He was thinking of all that had been said—of Edith's words, "hope comes soonest to those who most readily despair." Did they mean anything? Was his future after all to be bright, and cheerful, full of contentment, if not of bliss and happiness? His wife that had been would, in a week or two, so he heard, become the wife of another and more fascinating man than himself. Was he free to choose again, with his instincts all sharpened by experience? and, if so, would any right-minded girl or woman accept his choice?

He sat in the little room next to his child's bedroom

while Judith was putting the boy to bed. He was waiting to go in and bid the little fellow good-night before returning to the mess, there to listen to the chatter about horses and races and yachts and such-like little matters, which after his baby's prattle always seemed to him so senseless. At his feet snored Mr. Wilkes, faithful, always faithful—grim and ugly as Judith herself, who presently tapped at the door and announced that all was ready. Outside the rain was pouring down in torrents. It was a wretched evening after a beautiful, happy day: the barometer and Jim's spirits had fallen together.

"'Ook, daddee dear," said little Jim as his father entered the room, "pitty ickle picter Lalla gave me."

Vraille leant over the boy's cot and looked at a detestable coloured print of a very solemn subject—Christ on His way to Calvary. The boy was delighted with it, and held it up close to Jim's face, making several remarks upon it.

"I think, Judith," said Vraille, "if you do not mind, that it would be better to keep the sadder part of the story of our faith from the child until he is a little older. Teach him the simple portions of it if you will, but not its horrors—no, not its horrors—not yet."

"Lord love yer, sir!" said Judith. "I meant no harm givin' it to 'im, an' never thought there was none. He's very fond o' that there picture—I'll take it from 'im termorrer," she whispered, "since yer wishes it; but he wouldn't let me now—and," she continued aloud, "he knows all about it. Tell daddee what it is, sweetheart."

"Poor man cumble down," said little Jim in a slow tone of deep condolence, rather than of reverence.

Vraille winced.

"An' why did the poor man tumble down?" asked Judith, intent only on parading her pupil's knowledge.

"'Cause his cross—too heavy; cross too heavy, daddee dear."

"That will do," said Jim; "take it from him now, Judith, and let us say good-night."

And then he went out into the rain, Mr. Wilkes following close upon his heels.

CHAPTER VI.

RESOLUTIONS.

MRS. BOMPAS, to her horror and disgust, discovered, through Colonel Taplow, that her companion was flirting with Major Vraile. She was justly incensed, and sought further evidence of Harriet, who supplied her with all that was necessary to complete the proof. Still, Mrs. Bompas had "nothing to go upon," and she did not tax the girl with her offence, but sought to terminate their connection on other and more conclusive, not to say less embarrassing, pretexts. But this was not so easy. The hen-house fable about the falling off of the eggs turned out a failure; and Mrs. Bompas was at her wits' end for an excuse to dismiss "the wretch" who had dared to come between her and her affections, when Harriet and Alfred together, with very long faces, came to her and unfolded a terrible tale of duplicity and crime.

Off went Mrs. Bompas with it to Cicely Starling.

"What *do* you think?" she said, "one of Gwendoline's new silk frocks and a pearl bracelet of my own have been found in Miss Dare's box!"

"Who found them there?" asked Cicely.

"Harriet."

"And had Harriet your orders to search Miss Dare's box?"

"No; certainly not, nothing of the sort. I was taken entirely by surprise. What shall I do?"

"Give Harriet in charge of the police," said Cicely; "she put them there."

"Why, Harriet has lived with me for the past—for a great number of years," exclaimed Mrs. Bompas, recollecting herself just in time; "and I trust her as I would myself. No, no; I have had my suspicions for weeks past, and rather than be robbed, I shall give Miss Dare her warning and her wages, and tell her to go without waiting for the end of the quarter."

"Without giving her your reasons?" cried Cicely. "Oh, surely, Mrs. Bompas, that would be hardly fair."

"Why should I give her any reason, except that she don't suit? If I did, there would be a fuss, and policemen in the house, and all sorts of things."

Argument with Mrs. Bompas was as effective as argument with the east wind. She came to Mrs. Starling ostensibly for advice, really with her mind made up. She left with her intentions as fixed as ever; but her courage somewhat failed her when she came to consider how best to put her resolution into effect. Miss Dare was no ordinary governess; not a Miss Meek, in fact. Mrs. Bompas rather feared her "còmpañion;" and as she neared her house, her courage oozed away more and more rapidly. But an interview with Harriet reassured her, and she decided to dismiss Edith Dare without loss of time as "incompetent to teach, and devoid of lady-like instinct" (though she framed the phrase differently in her mind), reserving her real reason for the written "character" she would assuredly be called upon to give at some

future date by Miss Dare's next employer. For Mrs. Bompas was, of course, an honourable woman; she thoroughly believed Harriet's story; and though she was reluctant to repeat it to her whom it most concerned, dreading the possibility of police interference and its attendant unpleasantness, she was determined that no other lady should be subjected to such treatment as that of which she had been the victim; and, come what might, her duty as an honest woman was paramount. There were reasons why she was exceedingly glad to dismiss the girl, but they were not those for which the girl was to be dismissed.

"Miss Dare," she said, when the pair were next alone, "I have put into this envelope your wages to the end of the quarter; and as I have decided to do without a companion for the future, I should be glad if you could conveniently suit yourself with another home as soon as possible, only I must ask you not to apply to me for a character."

She had carefully thought out this little speech and had committed it to memory. It was, she flattered herself, exceedingly neat and to the point. It never occurred to her that her announcement might be considered somewhat sudden, seeing that its purport had never even been hinted at before; nor, having decided upon the words she intended to use, did she deem it expedient to preface them with any introductory remarks. She felt just a little nervous, and her nervousness increased as Edith Dare looked at her in blank surprise without making the slightest movement toward the envelope held out to her. This in itself was embarrassing; her outstretched arm was

converted into an awkward-looking, meaningless sort of finger-post; and after a faltering quaver or two it fell helplessly into her lap, when Miss Dare, with a very quiet smile, said—

“And may I ask, Mrs. Bompas, what has led you to this sudden decision, and why I am not to apply to you for a character, as you term it?”

Willingly, at that moment, would the poor widow have exchanged a dozen pearl bracelets for a tenth part of the other's composure. She turned very red in the face, and looked at the carpet, caught sight of her feet and drew them within her skirts; she shifted her position, pretending to rearrange her sofa-cushions; she fidgeted, but could not make herself comfortable.

“Oh, things I have heard,” she stammered out, at last, blundering into the mistake of all others she most wished to avoid; “no, not that either; not quite up to managing the children, I mean—educating them, I should say; that is, hardly the sort of companion, you know, required by a lady of any position. I think it best, at all events, that we should part.”

“Your reasons appear somewhat complicated, Mrs. Bompas; and, for the sake of simplicity, will you kindly take one of them at a time? What have you heard about me?”

The directness of the question, the girl's polite manner and her smile, instead of calming the good lady, threw her completely off her balance.

“Things that I do not intend to repeat—they have nothing to do with it.”

“Then I must apologize,” replied Edith, bowing, “for having mistaken your meaning. I thought that,

possibly, Colonel Taplow or Harriet or Alfred—you know their tattling tendencies as well as I do myself; better perhaps—might have influenced you; but since you say that gossip has *nothing to do with it*—I think that was your expression—of course the word of a *gentlewoman* suffices. Incompetence and want of polish—those are my faults? I regret them extremely; and am very sorry. There is little else, I think, to be said. Do I understand that I shall put you to no inconvenience if I make arrangements to leave at once?”

Mrs. Bompas intimated her opinion that the sooner she left the better; when, to her astonishment, Miss Dare simply bowed and left the room, noiselessly closing the door behind her.

News in a place of St. Dogwells' dimensions does not take long to circulate, especially if it happens to contain an unpleasant flavour. Within a very little time it was the talk of the town that Mrs. Bompas had given her governess summary warning. Cicely, knowing what she did, positively dreaded meeting Edith Dare, yet longed to help her if she could. She told Tom the whole story and asked him what she had better do.

“Accuse her of theft behind her back, and never give her a chance of explaining!” he exclaimed. “Impossible, there must be some mistake. However, find out, Cis, all you can from the girl herself, without letting her know what Mrs. Bompas told you.”

So Cicely wrote a little note to Edith Dare asking her to come to Guildhall Villa as soon as she could do so alone.

Days elapsed, but at last she came and told her side of the story.

"I cannot discover who has anything to say about me, unless it be that horrible woman Harriet. I thought I could get to the bottom of it all, and put myself right before I left; but they are too many for me. Mrs. Bompas will not speak to me even to say good-morning. What can I do? I thought I had a fairly brave spirit for a woman; but they are breaking it, breaking it, Cis dear, out of pure malice, it seems. They want me gone. Even as I left the house to-day, Harriet asked me with a sneer if I were coming back."

"Never will I go to Golden Hill again or speak to Mrs. Bompas, no, never!" said Cicely, in tears, holding her friend's hand in hers. "You must leave the place, Edith; it is not right that you should stay there another day."

"I can leave when I like—without a character; and, even so, it will be a happy release, as they say when afflicted people die. But then what am I to do? I have no money to waste on hotel bills, even if I could go to one alone; no roof to cover me; no friends, Cis, no prospects now, of getting such another situation, nothing."

"Stay here, Edith, stay here," cried Cicely, the tears running down her rosy cheeks.

Edith did not cry.

"You are very, very good to me," she said. "What am I to answer? I have no one to go to for help; but I cannot——"

"There is a box-room upstairs we can turn out, if you don't mind sleeping next the roof," Cicely inter-

rupted, "and, dear, it would be such a pleasure." She ran out of the room to see, as she said, what could be done.

And so it was arranged quickly and quietly, as kind-hearted little women do arrange things for those they love and pity. The two women separated in peace and with kisses; but when Tom presently came home and heard of the day's doings, flustering began in earnest.

"What an infernal shame!" he cried. "That woman should be hanged, drawn, and quartered; nothing short of physical pain would make *her* feel—the cad! Put Miss Dare up? I should just think so; for as long as ever she likes to stay. Oh, Lord, whatever will the Major say? It'll drive him silly."

The Major had to be told; and the Starlings found themselves in a very awkward position. Edith had been dismissed, as she herself believed, for general incompetence and on account of tittle-tattle, the purport of which she had not been told and could not discover for herself; but they were behind the scenes and knew that a far more serious charge had been alleged against her. What should they do? How act for the best?

In this dilemma they decided to do nothing, but to lay the case before James Vraille and abide by his decision.

"No," said Tom; "we had better not tell Miss Dare anything until we have consulted with him; he'll set us right, and, by Jove, he's the boy to see justice done."

They could hear his heavy footfall overhead as he danced about the nursery floor, playing with his

baby; they could hear little Jim's laughter, and Judith's deep-toned merriment. They heard the latch of the wicket at the top of the stairs drawn back and a little voice call out—

"Don't go 'way, daddee dear; oh dear, oh dear, daddee's goin' 'way—boo-hoo! boo-hoo!" followed by a long, deep wail of piteous lament.

"My boy, my little chap," came a whispering voice in answer, "I must go now—hush! hush, my man, I really must; some day we'll have a house all our very own, you and I and Lalla, and I'll never go away. Take him, Judith. I *must* go."

"We cannot tell him now," said Tom.

"No; better not; to-morrow," his little wife replied.

So on the morrow Cicely followed her guest to the converted box-room, and told her that Tom's last word of command had been, "Stand fast, and await further orders from the Major."

Miss Dare's trunks had just arrived, and she was unpacking them. She desisted for a moment while Cicely was speaking, and then, without answering, plunged her arm into the open box before her and drew out from the bottom of it a leather writing-case.

"This, Cicely," she said, "was my father's; he had it with him when he died. It was afterwards sent to me. In one of the pockets of it I found—this."

She held a slip of yellow, time-worn paper in her hand, and unfolding it she read out—"Statement of my account with Vraille;" and then followed a number of dates and figures, in various sums of rupees, all of which she read carefully, one after another, deducting each amount from the last balance as she went along.

"This is evidently," she said at last, "a statement' showing when and in what instalments a considerable debt was paid off—or almost paid off, for the last entry is—'Still due—400 rupees.' Do you understand? My father, when he died, owed Major Vraille about 35*l*. I feel certain he lent that money, prompted by some very generous impulse. It has never been wholly paid off, so far as I can gather. It is still due; it is a debt I still owe Major Vraille. He is not the sort of man one can approach on money matters—anything sordid does not belong to, and cannot easily be brought into, the atmosphere that surrounds *him*—and I cannot, I cannot put the question to him. Probably he has totally forgotten the circumstance. However, I feel compelled to refund that money, and how am I to do it now? He is a difficult man to lie to; but I was forced into telling him a half-lie the other day, when he asked me if pure chance brought me to this place. Not altogether, Cis. The opportunity occurred; I seized it, thinking it would clear my path of this difficulty. It has not done so—I am as far from my object as ever. I must begin again—from the beginning. Oh, if he only knew!"

"Let me tell him, then," said the simple-minded Cicely, only too anxious to help her friend.

"Never," cried Edith, jumping to her feet; "never—do you suppose that I would have confided in you had I thought you were not to be trusted?—never! Promise, Cicely, faithfully, or I leave this house to-night and walk—yes, walk to London and go on the stage. I mean what I say."

Little Mrs. Starling, as she gave her promise, began

to think her lot in St. Dogwells was cast among the most extraordinary people with the most extraordinary views. The Major's eccentricities were difficult enough to understand; but here was a woman who seemed bent on out-Vrailling Vraille.

"Half-confidence is worse than no confidence at all," Edith continued, "so—remember, I trust you—look here." She dived into her box again, and presently produced a roll of foolscap paper. "This," she said, holding it up, "is the copy of my father's letter, recommending Major Vraille for the Victoria Cross. I have told you all about that before; but I have never told any one of the little slip of paper I found inside the packet, when it was forwarded to me. Here it is. Now listen—

"'To any member of Colonel Dare's family into whose hands this official letter may fall.—James Vraille saved his life, and behaved most gallantly under very difficult circumstances. This recommendation for the V.C. will, in all probability, not be entertained. He is not a man to push his own interests. He deserves the reward; help him to it—it is his due.—R. D.'"

"Oh, your father wrote that, thinking he might die," said Cicely.

"My father's Christian name did not begin with R. No; I do not know who wrote it."

"I do," Cicely exclaimed excitedly—"Richard Doyle!"

"Ah, yes, it might have been he. I did not know he was with Major Vraille at the time. Well, anyway, as *I* was the only member of Colonel Dare's family

interested, the appeal was of very little use. I sent the packet, just as I received it, with a letter of my own—the best I could write—to the War Office. It was returned with a memorandum in a clerk's handwriting, to the effect that the question had been finally settled in the negative long before and could not be reopened. I never told Major Vraille. Do you know, Cicely, that my father behaved very unjustly to him when they were serving together many years ago in England? Do you know—yes, you do now—that ever since that time he has been our benefactor? He came to me the other day and besought me to ask his help before any other person's, if ever I needed help. Proud as I am, I would do so—and there is not another person in the world to whom I could go, under similar conditions. But there is nothing mean or paltry about *him*; there are no after considerations or under-currents with *him*; he is such a gentleman, Cicely. There; now you may tell him anything you like, except about that money; that is a matter between me and him only, to be settled, one way or another, some day."

So that evening the Starlings button-holed the Major, and the trio held a solemn conclave.

He listened fairly quietly until all had been explained, and then burst out with—

"It makes my blood boil to listen to—to think of. That such things are possible is enough to make a man bow his head in shame for his fellow-creatures. We arrogate to ourselves the primary position in creation; we boast of possessing souls, and speak contemptuously of animals as only endowed with

instinct. Look at that dog. If only he could understand what his masters and mistresses *can* do, he would never follow one faithfully again; he would distrust all men for ever after."

He strode up and down the room, while the poor Starlings looked rather awe-stricken; they had never seen him so thoroughly roused before. At last he threw himself into a chair.

"But let us be just," he said; "let us in pity's name—pity for that poor girl, and pity for that other woman's miserable stupidity—consider what is best to be done. Exonerated Miss Dare must be. To leave her in ignorance of the crime imputed to her would be culpable; for who knows what harm the slander might do her in the future, when she would be powerless to refute it? Yes, she must be told. Mrs. Starling, you must tell her."

Cicely undertook this duty with grave misgivings, but found her task easier than she had supposed it would be. Edith Dare only laughed scornfully. "What *does* it matter?" she said. "What can one expect of gross ignorance, combined with petty jealousy and vanity? James Vraille knows. Folly, he told me the other day, works far more mischief in the world than sin. He is right."

"But," asked Cicely in surprise, "do you not intend to punish Mrs. Bompas for spreading such wicked reports about you? Do you not care what she says of you? It may do you harm."

"Not it. No sensible person would believe a word Mrs. Bompas says; and for the opinion of the world in general I care not a single rush."

Cicely had used her utmost tact in making known Mrs. Bompas's absurd accusations to Edith, and congratulated herself upon her diplomacy. She was quite relieved to find how resignedly her friend took what to any one else would have been a cruel blow. "Why, she treated the whole thing with the scorn and contempt it deserves," she said to Tom.

She would have been surprised could she have seen "the proud Edith," as she called her, fling herself upon her bed and moan, "There is no such thing as justice, except Nature's cruel justice; effort is of no avail—none; it is better, far better, to be a silly fool like that woman than to be cursed with brains and sensibility as I am. He is right. The world for some people is an impossible place to live in."

There was a tap at the door, and in an instant she was the haughty, upright Edith Dare of a week or two ago.

"Come in," she said, and Judith's rugged countenance appeared.

"Master's in the nuss'ry, miss, an' wants ter know if he can speak to yer a minnit 'fore he goes." She snapped out the words, and when she had finished speaking the muscles of her mouth twitched comically as if she were chewing something hard between her teeth. Then, suddenly, she added, "Is there nothin' I can do for yer, please, miss?"

Edith looked into the quaint, stern face, and said slowly, "Judith, do you know I have been accused of theft?"

"Poor dear! I were the only words that Mrs. Foresight could find to say; but they were enough, more

than enough. They were an acquittal without a trial and for this very reason they brought balm to the girl's injured heart. Her pride was humbled, but she herself was lifted up to the high pinnacle of honesty on which Mrs. Foresight always stood by those simple words, "Poor dear!"

"You know what sorrow means," she said, with her arms round the rugged woman's neck and her head resting on her hard shoulder; "I can see it in your face, as I can in his. You, you know that I am incapable of such a thing before I deny it, don't you? Judith, the whole story is a villainous lie!"

"Lor, miss, who ever could suppose it was anythin' else, comin' from where it did? There, there, don't 'ee cry, missy dear, but go inter the master an' see what he has to say. He has a way with him of putting these things right in no time."

He was very gentle; all his fury had abated. When she entered the nursery he had his boy on his knee telling him a story about "a little baa-lamb that had lost its mother and went bleating down the street in search of her."

"Are you fond of children?" he asked, just as if that were the only question then present in his mind.

"Miss Dare been clyin," said little Jim, looking up at Edith. "Don't cly, Miss Dare; boy cly funtimes, hink."

The girl caught him up in her arms and kissed him, pretending to laugh, while all the time the tears were wet upon her cheeks and the boy's sympathetic little hands were trying to wipe them away.

Jim talked to her very gently and encouragingly.

He told her that she must, in justice to herself, compel Mrs. Bompas to retract every word she had said to Cicely, and declared that, if she failed, he would take the matter in hand himself. And then he questioned her about her future, her intentions, her wishes.

"I am obliged," he said, "to go up to London some day soon myself on business. The fact is, my dear old uncle has given me some money, and I have to see about it. When I am there, I may just as well make arrangements for you; and if you will trust me, I will do the very best I can. In the meantime you must remain here; to run away would be the worst thing you could possibly do"—he put it like that; and he spoke the truth, but not quite the whole of it.

"Eventually," he continued after a pause, "I mean to leave this place. You once told me I was wasted here, and"—he smiled—"I am vain enough to believe you. There are great things to be done in life; and instead of chucking away my time as I have done, I am going to try and get a more responsible command. My uncle wishes it. When I come back from London I will show you his letter. But what I wished to say *now* is, don't be disheartened, don't be downcast: never, as long as I'm alive, say you have no friend to turn to; you shall always have one, whatever—whatever happens."

She thanked him in words and in looks, and they talked on and on; they two—and the child. There was much to settle and discuss; but the moody Major had for the time thrown the burden of care from off his shoulders, and laughed at her thanks while he played horses with his boy. All his shyness and diffidence

had departed, and he was as childish as his child could wish. His high spirits were infectious, and little Jim that afternoon for the first time in his life drove, or tried to drive, a very refractory tandem, instead of, as usual, a single horse.

But Nemesis, in the shape of Judith, at length appeared, and little Jim was told to "say good-night like a good boy," an injunction he only partially obeyed; for after saying, "Good-night, daddee, God b'ess oo; good-night, Miss Dare, God b'ess oo too," he suddenly exclaimed, "you orful orty Lalla ter take er boy ter bye-bye. 'Anter hear about er poor ickle baa-lamb 'gain, that lost his muffer . . . boo! hoo!"

But Judith bore him off, expostulations and all.

"I generally go in and say good-night to him when he's in bed," said Jim shyly; "would you like to come with me?"

Edith readily assented, and, accordingly, when Judith knocked at the wall to intimate that all was ready, they went into the nursery together, where they found little Jim kneeling up in bed in what Vraille called his "ephod."

"Boy goin' to say his p'ayers now," he remarked cheerily, folding his arms before him.

Judith sat on a chair beside his cot and held his hands in hers; Vraille and Edith Dare stood at the foot of the bed and watched. When he had been reduced by Judith's injunctions to a proper state of mind, he began, very slowly and haltingly, to repeat—

"Gen—tle Jesus—meek an' mile,
'Ook upon a ickle—chile;
Pit—ee my thim——"

And there he stopped; the word was too difficult for him. But after several attempts, prompted by Judith, he got out a confused sound which was allowed to pass, and then went on—

“’Uffer me—to come to ’ce—anem!”

“No,” muttered a deep voice huskily; “I cannot repeat ‘amen’ to that—not now—not yet.”

“He allus will say *anem* ’stead o’ *amen*,” Judith explained. But Vraille did not hear; he had caught up the warm little quivering body in his arms and was folding it to his heart.

“To think,” he said in an undertone to Edith, “that the only word those baby lips could not repeat was *simplicity*. Would God that I were as he is!”

She did not answer, but took the boy from him, and herself laid him down in his bed again, kissing him tenderly as she did so. Then they left Judith to put him to sleep.

Judith was extraordinarily grim and taciturn that night, which meant that something unusually burdensome was weighing on her mind. A lady, a real lady, had kissed her, and such a thing had never happened to her before in her whole life’s experience.

The complex emotions which had prompted Edith Daré to do what she had done were far beyond Mrs. Foresight’s powers of analysis—as, possibly, they had been beyond Edith’s—but Judith put her own interpretation on the incident, and expressed it in her own way to little Jim as she hushed him off to sleep.

“He’s that big an’ grand baby-boy,” she said, “that folks is afeerd ter anger ’im, an’ p’r’aps she didn’t know

his 'eart quite like. But, lor! he's never thinkin' of hisself, 'e ain't, but allus o' other people, an' that's what'll get un inter trouble one o' these fine days, I'm thinkin'. Hush-sh! now—go ter sleep, an' don't bē singin' 'Allelulia! Allelulia!' any more. Lord! what a powerful holt them Salvationers, as they call themselves, 'as taken on yer, to be sure."

"Bye, baby buntin'," she crooned; "daddy's gone a huntin'—aye, that he 'as—for mares' nests. That there Bompas'll never listen to reason. Miss Dare—a lady born 'an bred, spite of her father, an' one as ain't above kissin' Judith Foresight—may call upon 'er, an' call upon 'er, an' call upon 'er, but *she*'ll never get no explana-shuns, as he calls 'em; not she—I knows better. 'Ave, justice done yer,' says he—that she never will; but I'll see justice done nex' time I catches sight of 'Arriet or Alfred . . . 'Miss Edith' he's taken ter call 'er now—an' a fine upstandin' noble-lookin' pair they be, too. Well, well, it's a curos world, baby boy—'an you've never knowd a mother's love, poor chick, nor he a wife's, for that matter . . . Bye, bye, bye. Hush—sh! Aye, you're sleepin' now, sweetheart, an' restin'; maybe he, too, will be findin' what'll seem to him like rest some day, and soon, p'r'aps."

The baby in the cot at her side turned. "Allelulia," he said in his sleep. "Army band—say—Allelulia—Lalla—Alle—"

"Hush—sh, hush—sh," said Judith, and all was still.

James Vraille, the man always ki⁶ king against pricks, had set himself an impossibility to perform, and of

course he failed. Common justice, he fancied, the merest atom of common-sense, was all that was required to set Miss Dare high above the suspicion entertained by Mrs. Bompas. Unfortunately, this common justice and common-sense could only be supplied by Mrs. Bompas herself to be of any use. He told Edith to go to Golden Hill, and demand to be confronted with the servants. Edith went, and was met at the hall door with the sneer, "Mrs. Bompas is not at home, and never will be." He then went himself, and was unfortunate enough to find that the widow was "busily engaged." He met her in the street, walking with the Taplows; she looked him full in the face and cut him dead. He had to acknowledge himself defeated, and he chafed under his defeat. But there the matter did not rest. Notwithstanding all his experience, it never occurred to him that a woman who believes she has been deceived is about as easy to approach as a tigress, and that a *silly* woman who *fancies* herself deceived is an opponent encased in a mail of prejudice and armed with poisoned weapons. The news soon spread that Mrs. Bompas had found out the Major's true character at last, and had "sent him about his business." Round and round, and round again, it went, gathering in volume and importance. Merrily and even joyfully wagged St. Dogwells tongues, like the clappers of empty bells. Was he fit to be known? Ought he not, after his conduct—Miss Dare was, of course, no better than she should be—to be cut? Certainly. And so, too, ought the Starlings; though they, poor deluded things were not quite so bad as that deceitful Miss Dare.

All this affected Jim no more than the surging sea affects the light on Eddystone; it was all beneath him, and he knew none of it. But Judith, whose existence rested on a lower level, it attacked with the full force of its malignant fury. She harboured her vengeance for many a day, but at last seized her opportunity and made the most of it. There was no "cutting" Mrs. Foresight when she conceived that she had a duty to perform; Alfred met her face to face and she would not let him pass.

"I'm glad to meet yer," she said, "with yer 'igh-eeled boots, an' yer sham rings outside yer gloves. Got 'em on 'cause it's Sunday, I s'pose? but 'twill take mor'n them to make a man o' *you*; yer sniylin', drivlin', lyin', thievin' monkey on an orgin. Come, prick up yer ears, an' list t' what I'm sayin'; let yer witnesses—you there 'Arriet, an' you there master Algy listen too. Are you all ready? Well then, this yer flunkey is a liar an' a thief, an' were I a man I'd thrash un within an inch o' his skulkin' life. But, anyways, he and his 'complices can bring an action 'gainst me for 'famation of character, which is all *I* want. There; that's my last say." And Mrs. Foresight turned her back upon the little crowd she had managed to collect; and stalked homeward with a grim smile of infinite satisfaction on her face.

Meanwhile, Vraile sat in his barrack-room a night or two after the arrival of Edith Dare at Guildhall Villa and turned things over in his mind.

Marriage for him had meant a tragical mistake. He had found it all out—a sudden wrench, a heart-pang or two of deep regret, and darkness had filled the

cavity left by an infatuation that had been dissipated; there was nothing now remaining but the scar. He had always believed in the poetic justice of things—was it possible that, after all, a glimmer of hope shone on the horizon of his lonely path? Were goodness and sweetness to be his reward after all his long journey—the attainment of that peace which he had longed for all his life, and which had never until now seemed to him attainable? Then there was his keen sense of duty. The hand of fate seemed to be pointing out the way toward a complete fulfilment of it: the girl was miserable—far more miserable than he had any right to suppose himself to be; perhaps he could rescue her from that misery, and his pledged word would have been kept in far, far more than the letter—in the very spirit.

“What a fool I have been!” he cried, starting to his feet and striding across the room to his writing-table.

“Hours and hours, days, weeks of thought have I spent, cribbed in this coffin of a room, wasting my life and opportunities. Now”—and he swept his arm through the air—“let me, here, to-night, wipe out the past and start afresh without fear or hesitation. I will—from to-morrow; I will!”

He took a letter from the drawer of his writing-table and went back with it to his chair.

“I told you once, Wilkes,” he said, looking down at his dog as he filled a pipe and lighted it, “that we were to be grim. I revoke that; we are to eat, drink, and be merry—not because to-morrow we die, but because it is our duty to diffuse happiness on all around us, and to be cheerful ourselves. Come, let us see what he says.”

He unfolded his letter, and holding it near to the lamp—for Uncle Ben's handwriting had latterly become more and more crabbed and microscopic—read—

“MY DEAR BOY,

“I hasten to reply to your last to see if I can^c make you less doleful than you seem to be. Of course you have made mistakes in your life. Who has not? I, at any rate, who have made hundreds, would not give twopence for the chap who said he had made none. But the fact is, you want change—change of society, scene, and work. Get out of St. Dogwells; go to that army-agent and buy an exchange at once—anything you like, except one that will take you out of England, and pay anything you like for it. Perhaps you have not money enough to make you independent of all other considerations; so I have transferred to your agents^c sufficient to give you an extra thousand a year. I am a rich man with no use for my money, and nothing to look forward to, so I can afford to make you a little present. It is yours, to do as you like with, now instead of a little later on—that is all.

“But, my dear boy, if you wish to thank me, you can do so in two ways. First, by trying to obliterate that ‘pale cast’ which seems to have come over you of late; secondly, by sticking to your profession. Don't talk of leaving it. I have watched you from boyhood to manhood treading, as it were, the wine-press of experience; and, before I die, I hope to see you, not only happy, but full of the right sort of ambition, raising the name of Vraill^e on high. Life is before not behind you, as it is with me, make the most

of it while you can. Chuck thought out o' window; do that which comes to your hand to do, and do it *cheerfully*, as well as manfully and honestly; the rest will follow. You want sympathy, and you have mine, fully; you know that. You have had bad luck hitherto; but, with a fresh start, you are young enough to get a great deal of enjoyment out of life yet. So do as I say."

The letter ended with some brief allusions to the writer's health and some very kind messages to little Jim.

"You write charmingly about him," concluded the old gentleman; "and I can well understand what a source of pleasure he must be to you. I always knew it would be so."

Jim leant back in his chair, and took his pipe out of his mouth.

Yes, he had trodden the winepress of experience red-stained. He had tasted life, and knew it, and the pitifulness of it all; he had writhed under its injustices, and had recently seen others suffer them. He had, as a boy, as a man, looked up to, loved, and honoured Uncle Ben. Uncle Ben was getting feeble, and would die. What would he do then? What could he do but submit? Daily and hourly there was going up to Heaven the smoke of sacrifice and suffering.

Then, as he sat there, looking down upon the faithful dog at his feet, thinking of Judith's fidelity, and so of the sweetness of little Jim, he recollected the words that Edith Dare had spoken in the sandy cove—where

the sun had shone, the waters danced, the little children laughed, where the air had breathed health and strength and fragrance—"Hope comes quickest to those who most readily despond."

He would hope on and fear not. Thought long continued only led to the slough of despond in which a man's struggles were not only unsightly but vain. That feeling of isolation was the outcome of pure selfishness and nothing else. Who was he, to attempt to fathom the unfathomable?—an insignificant shaving of humanity. No, he had not done his duty in the past; he had at best been beating the air. Uncle Ben saw it; Uncle Ben, who had always been so good to him, had pointed him out a new path, and he would take it. He had his child, he had more—he had hope. On the morrow he would turn over a fresh leaf in his book of life, struggle to forget himself, and strive to cast sunshine where he had hitherto thrown gloom.

With this determination dominating his whole mind, he went to bed, and—eventually—to sleep.

CHAPTER VII.

BE CHEERFUL !

THE week's leave that Major Vraille had taken was nearly up. He had but one day more to spend in London, and then he must return. He had almost succeeded in one of his objects; in the other he had signally failed. His exchange to an agreeable and important station, where he would find plenty of pleasant companionship and soldiering to his taste, and be within easy reach of London at the same time, was well-nigh effected; but as to his endeavours to find a suitable *pied-à-terre* for Edith Dare, his efforts, so far, had been absolutely barren of result. He had done his very best; he had spent the greater part of his time in hansom cabs, tearing from one end of London to the other; he had visited agency office after agency office, answered advertisements in person and by letter, pestered his friends, and found, in the end, that it was by no means so easy a matter as he had supposed to secure a pleasant and ladylike occupation for a girl of exceptional talent, well connected, and not exacting in the matter of emolument so long as a comfortable home was guaranteed. Had he confided in Edith or Cicely he might have spared himself a good deal of unnecessary labour. But he had not done so absolutely, because he had wished his success

to be a surprise to the inmates of Guildhall Villa on his return. He had gone his own way, and it had led to nothing.

But he was not dejected. On the contrary, his step, as he walked along the street from his club to Mr. Skrim's office, was sprightly, almost jaunty; in his button-hole he wore a flower, and he whistled softly to himself as he went along.

"After all," he muttered to himself, as he rang Mr. Skrim's bell, "I may just as well look upon it as the best of omens; and so it is. However, in a day or two I shall know for certain."

Mr. Skrim was disengaged, and Jim was ushered into his sanctum. The rosy little agent seemed not a day older than when Captain Vraille had sought his assistance in years gone by, although the Major's face showed only too plainly how many years had passed since then.

"Well, Mr. Skrim, have you settled the thing for me?"

"Next door to it," replied the negotiator cautiously.

"Why not quite?"

"Well, the fact is, Major, you're flying high, and must pay high, I'm afraid, for what you want. You can't get the best station in England, and the best battery in the service for nothing, you know. Now, another hundred would, I think, be pretty certain——"

"All right," said Jim, going to the window and looking out.

"And an extra twenty-five——"

"All right," said Jim, without turning round.

"But make it fifty, and——"

"Look here, Mr. Skrim, just show me the man's own instructions about this exchange, will you?" Jim had come back to the table, and was scrutinising the agent closely.

"Confidential, my dear sir—confidential," said Mr Skrim hastily.

"All right; then I'll write to him myself. I know him a little, and I dare say we shall be able to come to an understanding between ourselves."

But this did not suit the mediator at all. The Major was joking; he was always so very exacting and precipitate; no doubt the matter could be arranged in the course of the day; a telegram should be despatched at once, and the answer sent round to the club.

"I don't care how soon it comes off, you know," said Jim, picking up his hat; "but I want a fortnight or so to look round me before I join."

The feeling that all he was saying and doing was but a repetition of what he had said and done before crept over him as he slowly sauntered back to his club. The scene was precisely the same as it had been on that previous occasion some long, long time back in his memory: the roads were under repair, there was a listlessness about every one he met, and a drowsiness in the air; Mr. Skrim, the houses, the shop-windows, the club, the expected telegram, the musty smell in the smoking-room, and the papers littered about—all, everything and everybody, the same as it had been then. He himself even had not changed; he was acting the same part; and, please Heaven and the Fates, he would begin his life afresh from that point and live it as if the intervening period had never been.

"Hallo, Jim!"

He looked up from the paper on his knees, lying with the advertisement side uppermost, and exclaimed—

"Hallo, Dick!"

"Well, who'd have thought of seeing you?"

"And where on earth have you sprung from?"

"All right, eh?"

"All right."

And then silence fell on these two Britons, a silence due to British shyness and reserve. Each had a hundred questions to ask the other—each was excessively pleased and glad to meet the other; neither for the moment had anything particular to do, and neither spoke. They had shaken hands warmly, and "did not know what to say next."

"Have a drink?" said Doyle at last.

Jim assented from pure good fellowship. The drinks were brought, and then they thawed.

Doctor Dick had only arrived from India a few weeks previously, and was on leave, "finding London slow, with every one away, and biding his time for the pheasants." He was having a "fairly 'good time,'" considering the denuded state of the streets, and the deserted condition of the theatres, but he "hoped to do better as he went along." He certainly wore the air of a man bent on enjoyment; his handsome face was wreathed in smiles, complacent smiles; his blue eyes laughed; his cheeks, albeit he was a boy no longer but a man, bore the bloom of youth and health; and, as a matter of course, his clothes were new and good, and fitted his figure like a glove.

Jim looked at him and felt refreshed. Here was a man, cheerful, self-contained, calm, bent on enjoying himself, and withal dispensing the contagion of his equanimity on all around—a man to be with; a right good fellow, as Jim knew, and, as Jim believed, honestly and sincerely, a man to admire and to imitate. And yet he felt within himself that he could no more be as Doctor Dick was, and always had been, than he could fly. His heart went out to him, and in ten minutes they were talking, at least Jim was, as if they had but ten minutes more in which to relate all that had happened to them since they last met—and that was much.

They had luncheon together, and by the time their cigars afterwards were well under weigh Jim had recounted the strange chances that had brought him and Edith Dare together, and himself to London on her behalf.

“Well, but, my dear old Jim,” said Doctor Dick in his half-affectionate, half-patronising tone, “you’ll never do any good the way you’re going to work. Who’s likely to take a girl on your recommendation, I should like to know, when you can’t claim the slightest relationship?”

“I referred everybody to the Army List,” said Jim ruefully.

“Pooh! who cares about the Army List nowadays? Look here, I’ll try and square this job for you if you like. You say the girl’s a nice girl?”

“She’s a charming girl, Dick, with all sorts of sides to her character. She’s a genius; she can just sing the soul out of you; she’s as proud as Lucifer, as tender-

hearted as a child, as honest and straightforward and clever——”

“Hold! enough!” cried Doctor Dick. “I know your ecstasies of old. She just wants a fair start—is that it?”

“That’s it,” said Jim.

“Well, London’s full of my maiden aunts; they simply jostle one another in the street, and they all dote on me. All I have to do is to tell one of them—the first I meet—that another will snap up the chance of doing me a service if she don’t.”

“Look here, Dick, I’m serious about this; indeed I am; don’t turn it into fun.”

“Serious? Of course you are; who ever knew James Vraille anything but serious? So am I serious. Dining here to-night? Right; seven-thirty, sharp.” And before the astonished Jim had well comprehended the situation, Doctor Dick had sauntered across the room and left him alone, looking at the heavy door swinging backward and forward on its hinges.

Vraille employed his afternoon industriously, spending an hour at Fortnum and Mason’s, superintending the packing of a huge hamper, and another hour at a wine-merchant’s sampling champagne. Then he visited a linen-draper, of whom he purchased a quantity of goods warranted to wear and to wash, thence to a jeweller’s, thence to the Lowther Arcade, returning to the club, in time to dress for dinner, loaded with parcels.

“If we don’t have a really good dinner at Guildhall Villa some day soon,” he said to himself, “to inaugurate my good luck, my name’s not James Vraillé; and if they don’t all of them—God bless them!—understand

the meaning of these presents—Judith, and little Cicely Starling, and the boy, and—and all of them, then that's not my fault."

At five-and-twenty minutes past seven Doctor Dick appeared, irreproachably attired.

"What do you say to a theatre?" was his first remark.

"I'd sooner," said Jim hesitatingly, "stay here quietly and talk to you."

"So'd I," replied the Doctor. "Come along, the champagne's getting cold."

In his imperturbable way he told Jim that he had arranged with a Miss Dorothy Doyle to board and lodge Miss Dare, for a time to be specified hereafter, and that a room would be placed at her disposal in Miss Dorothy Doyle's house from and after the next day; "and here," he concluded, "is a letter to Miss Dare from my aunt for you to read."

Jim took the letter and read it through.

"A very nice letter," he said. "Dick, how am I to thank you? This is your doing—none of mine, and—and it will come better from you. There is one other thing I want you to do for me, and that is—that is—— You see, Dick, she is awfully hard up, poor girl, and I thought—I thought if you would not mind saying that Miss Doyle had kindly consented to enclose a month's salary in advance; if, I mean, you would not mind putting these notes into the letter, and saying they are—it is not strictly true, of course, but near enough—they are from her, you would do me a very great favour. You see, of course, Miss Doyle must be put to no expense, but, the girl mustn't know. Will you do this for me like a good fellow?"

The smile faded from Doctor Dick's face; his blue eyes opened wide with an expression of something like awe; and he slowly stretched out his hand to take the notes. "How am I to do it, Jim?" he asked. "Write it, do you mean? or get my aunt to write it, or what?"

"Humph!" said Major Vraille pensively; "I had not thought of all that." No; his mind was wandering here, there, and everywhere. He was full of the thoughts that were crowding in upon his brain, thoughts of success; of joy, perhaps, of happiness and peace. Things were going too well with him.

Doctor Dick could not be expected to know all this. He could only see before him a man whom he knew was capable of leading a forlorn hope without a moment's hesitation or a tremor of fear; a man from whom pain and disease had never wrung a complaint; a man ignorant, apparently, of the most ordinary usages of life—a baby among men, and yet a born leader of men.

Jim had recovered himself.

"Dick," he said, brightening up, "be the bearer of your own good news. You said you had nothing particular to do for the next few days; come back with me to St. Dogwells. I have often longed for your companionship since that dreary time when we said good-bye. Do come back with me, Dick. It's a wretched place, but I will do my best to make you comfortable at the Fort; and you can see Miss Dare for yourself," he added with subtle persuasion, "and report upon her, if you like, to your aunt. And I can show you my boy; yes, do come, Dick."

"There, my good fellow," returned the other

smiling; "don't dissipate your energies. Of course I'll come—nothing I should like better."

They sat up late; and when at last they separated for the night, Jim's life for the past few years lay bare for Dick to read, with one or two excepted details which were as yet but fancies and not facts.

"His kind eyes seemed to pity," was Jim's last thought as he fell asleep.—"That wretched business must have made a terrible impression on him," was Doctor Dick's.

In the early morning they met upon the platform and the doctor stared at Jim's curious assortment of baggage. "Why, are you the showman of a travelling caravan?" he said.

Jim laughed and paid his "extra-luggage" charge without a murmur. As the train was gliding out of the station he suddenly exclaimed—"I clean forgot Skrim's telegram; confound it; my head's like a sieve."

This led to a discussion on the proposed exchange. Jim had grown to loathe St. Dogwells, he said; it had suited the child, and so he had remained on; but the drought and the heat, and latterly the deluges of rain had rendered it less healthy than it had been. He had heard from a Doctor Spill whom he knew slightly that there was fever about, and so, with one thing and another, he had determined to apply for leave pending the sanction of his exchange and quit the place for good and all.

"And where do you intend going?" asked Doyle.

"Oh, somewhere quiet; somewhere near London, I think, for a time; and then, later on, I want to go to Cannes to see my uncle."

It was a long but not a tedious journey, for Jim when in good spirits was a capital companion, as Dick said laughingly; and Jim, when they had nearly reached their destination, declared he could well have stood an extra hour or two but for the prospect of a talk with "the boy" before the little chap's bedtime.

"He doesn't go to bed till seven," he said, "and we are due at a little after five, so, if you don't mind, we'll just look in and leave some of these things at the house on our way to the Fort."

"I suppose he is begining to talk a bit now?" said Doctor Dick.

"Talk! There's pretty nearly nothing he can't say somehow, excepting any word with *f* in it. It's a very funny thing," pursued Major Vraille thoughtfully, "that he should be able to compete more or less successfully with all the diphthongs except *f*. That stumps him. He said to me the other day—'There's a slea biting me toe.' He meant *flea*, you know; and he says *sly* for *fly*, and *sloor* for *door*. By the way, yes, *th* is generally *ff*, except when it's the lisp for an *s*; and he's just beginning to use the word, 'because,' which means a dawning appreciation of the sequence of ideas, though he still calls marmalade, *narberlind*, and a gentleman a *juggl'am*. But, oh, I don't know, Dick; it's impossible to analyse a child's language; you might as well try to analyse his mind. And a child's mind is profound—there's no other word for it. You cannot fathom it; pure and simple as it is, you cannot even see far into it; you cannot reason, still less argue with it; you think you know all it contains, and pretty nearly everything it doesn't, when,

all of a sudden, out comes an observation that fairly startles you with its originality. Things you tell him he will hide away somewhere in the convolutions of his little brain, as a squirrel hides away nuts, and finds them again days afterwards when he wants them, but when you least expect it. For an hour at a time he will live all by himself in a little world of make-believe. At one minute his little speech is doing its very utmost to express his every little thought; at the next he is solemnly silent, gazing before him, seeming to listen to whispers in the air which coarser ears than his are not meant to hear. Who can construe a child's thoughts then? The wisest man that ever lived knows nothing of the workings of a little child's mind."

"Why, Jim," said Doctor Dick, "you should write an essay, or, better still, a poem, upon children, you seem to know so much about them."

"Not about them, only about him; I know, or think I know, my own boy. We have been so much together, you see, Dick, that we understand one another. Other children seem half afraid of me; but he is never afraid. He comes into the room with his head up and his back flat, and says 'Daddee,' with a perfect fearlessness that is delightful—delightful! He has never been threatened with dark rooms, or bears or policemen, or any wicked nonsense of that sort. He knows no fear; he knows no shame; he is a little barbarian, but for all that a perfect little gentleman. He has the manners of a gentleman; his natural unconsciousness of self, his perfect ease, his utter disregard of class and station, make him a gentleman—he cannot help being one. And then, Dick, he is so generous—always ready to

offer the dog a piece of his cake before he touches it himself; so full of life, and spirits, geniality, gladness; so happy, so contented with everything and everybody. He is a never-ending joy to me; but I could not write a poem, or even an essay about him; I feel too keenly what Longfellow said: 'He is the *living* poem, and all the rest are dead.'

Not another word was spoken. There was nothing more to be said. The infinite tenderness in the gaunt man's tone, the look of tenderness in his eyes was enough: Doctor Dick leant back in his corner without a word, and Jim, with his chin resting on his hand, gazed out of the window at the landscape racing by.

The train at last rolled into the St. Dogwells' station, and a ten minutes' drive took them to Guildhall Villa.

Cicely came running into the hall.

"Welcome back, Major," she said; "you'll stay and dine here to-night after your journey, won't you? You must be tired."

"I've brought a friend with me," said Jim.

"Who is it?" she asked, peering out of the open door.

"Doctor Dick!" he replied in a tone of exultation.

Often had he talked of Doctor Dick to her and Edith Dare; many a time and oft had he sung his praises. Cicely was delighted; of course he must stay and dine too. Doctor Dick was accordingly brought in and introduced; the cab was unloaded; the case of champagne and the hamper of provisions were conveyed into the kitchen; Cicely bustled off after them to make the necessary preparations; and then Jim whispered cautiously—

"Now, Dick, come up with me and see him."

Opening his dressing-bag, which was lying in the hall, he took from it a couple of brown-paper parcels, and a highly-polished brass key-bugle, and with them in his hand sprang up the stairs, two at a time.

On the first landing he stopped to see if Dick were following.

"Listen," he said.

They stood still and listened. There was not a sound, and, somewhat more slowly, they ascended the second flight of stairs.

"Curious," said Jim, pausing again a little higher up, and turning round; "they must have heard the cab. I made certain Judith would have brought him out to shout to me over the banisters, as he generally does. I wanted you to hear him."

At the nursery door he stopped once more, and stood quite still with his hand on the handle, listening.

"There, there—there, there! By-e, by-e, by-e! Hush-sh, hush-sh, hush-sh! Ne-ver mind-it the-en—by-e bab-ee, by-e!" came the crooning sounds of Judith's voice, accompanied by the soft rhythmical beating of her foot on the floor, as she hummed the soothing lullaby.

"Why, it's not nearly his bedtime yet," muttered Jim; and he opened the door and went in. "What's the matter?" he asked quickly, taking a rapid step forward and bending over the little figure in Judith's arms.

"Just a bit of a cold he's caught," she said; "he's been fractious with it all the day. He didn't have his

proper 'mount o' sleep at noon neither, and seemed drowsy like, so I thought I'd hush un off."

"Poor little chap," said Jim softly, for the child's eyes were closed, and he did not wish to disturb him. "I'm so sorry," he added, turning to Doctor Dick; "he's not quite himself to-night, it seems, and we must wait until to-morrow to give him the things. It's a pity, too; I did want you to see him."

It was a pity. He had bounded up the stairs with those brown-paper parcels and that beautiful key-bugle, so full of pride and expectancy, and now they were held behind his back, for the time being useless, and rather in the way than otherwise. It was a pity.

He put the parcels on the mantelpiece looking rather crestfallen; but the bugle he kept in his hand. No paper wrappings hid its charms, and if left upon the mantelpiece it would be certain to attract Master Jim's attention directly he awoke; so Jim, not wishing to be forestalled in the pleasure of witnessing the first effects of his present, kept it in his hand.

"He isn't a bad-looking boy, is he, Dick?" he asked in a tone that implied he was the most beautiful child in Christendom.

Doctor Dick bent over the bundle of white flannel in Judith's arms and looked at it long and earnestly before answering. "Children are almost always beautiful in sleep," he said at last, looking up, "but this boy of yours, Jim, is a perfect picture—indeed he is."

Doctor Dick's praise was merited. The boy's full, rosy lips, half parted in sleep, the delicate curves of his soft sweet mouth, opening like a rose-bud, the long lashes lying on his cheek, the wealth of flaxen curls

scattered in profusion over Judith's arm, the dimpled little hand lying on her breast, all helped to form the picture that Dr. Dick had said, and said honestly, was perfect, and Jim, as he bent over the boy once more, no doubt considered very, very perfect.

"God bless you, my darling boy," he murmured, so softly that none heard him but the child.

Little Jim slowly opened his eyes. "Daddee—dear daddee," he said drowsily; and, turning his head slowly, he held out one little hand. Jim seized it.

"Are you glad to have him back, little chap? Have you missed him? Shall we have a right good game to-morrow to make up for lost time? and will you play upon the trumpet daddy's brought?"

This was all very imprudent, and Judith said, "Hush!" But the boy had caught the word, and in a sleepy little voice, with but a poor attempt at enthusiasm in it, said, "Zes, daddee de-ar, boy 'ants ter play er t'umpet 'ike Army band."

With a smile of triumph Jim held up the glittering key-bugle and placed it in the boy's outstretched hand. "There's your trumpet, little Jim," he said, "and to-morrow you shall play it to your heart's content."

But after putting it to his lips and blowing without producing any sound, the boy dropped it on the floor, and turning his head toward his nurse, said wearily, "Don't 'ant er t'umpet now, Lalla; play it 'nother day; anter go to bye-bye, now."

The look of disappointment had scarcely faded from Jim's face, when the child, in the same weary little tone

pleaded sadly, "Let er boy go bye-bye, Lalla, p'ease; boy 'ick, better 'gain to-morrow, hink!"

"Tell me, Dick, is anything the matter?" and a look of terror swept across his face.

"Lord love yer, no, sir!" exclaimed Judith; "just a bit of a cold he's caught, that's all."

"Nothing that a good night's rest won't cure," said Dr. Dick.

"Of course not," replied Jim, hastily; "come, let's leave him, then, and not bother him any more to-night."

They had got half-way down the stairs when Dr. Dick suddenly remembered his hat, which he had left in the nursery, and ran back to fetch it.

"Nurse," he said to Judith, "let me know—quietly, without bothering Major Vraille, when the boy's in bed. I'd like to have another look at him; I'm a doctor, you know—Dr. Doyle."

"It's this bit of a cold he's caught," said Judith.

"I know," said Dick; and he hurried out of the nursery and down the stairs.

All that day, and for a week past, Vraille had been listening to the still small voice within, which bade him smile and be cheerful. Be cheerful! Seek to diffuse happiness on all around! He had laid those lessons to heart, and had seen the wisdom of them. He had done more; he had sought to profit by them, and had determined so to guide his future life that he himself as well as others should benefit by the change. Be cheerful! It was a duty that man owed to man. The world was beautiful; men and women were better than they seemed to be; love and sympathy were sweet. The

clouds had risen, and fortune had appeared at last to smile upon him ; a new and better life, better because filled with hope, lay before him. Let him be cheerful then, and smile when others smiled ; smile, too, when they frowned, and seek to find out the meaning of the frown, due, perhaps, to sorrow that a little sympathy might soothe. And surely he himself had experienced real sorrow enough without unnecessarily creating for himself more out of idle apprehension. Let him, then, as Uncle Ben had said, get out of himself, and talk as the others were talking. There was no excuse for his glumness ; kind friends were welcoming him back amongst them, kind faces were smiling upon him, kind voices were thanking him for the presents he had brought. Tom was congratulating him on the results of his negotiations in London and wishing him luck ; an open telegram in his hand told him that his exchange had been effected, and on his own terms. One voice, sweeter than the rest, had spoken to him softly of gratitude, had soothed and caressed him, as it were, and calmed his troubled spirit, but now had passed away, and he could hear it in the distance mingling pleasantly with Dr. Dick's. Cicely, thoughtful, tender-hearted little Cicely, had assured him that a good night's rest was all that was required to make little Jim himself again on the morrow. Judith had no fear ; her rugged nature refused to admit a doubt ; it was a trifling childish ailment, she said, that would quickly pass away. Then what had he to fear ? Nothing ; and yet he felt he would have given thousands at that moment to hear one shout from little Jim.

But little Jim did not shout or even cry ; he only

lay wearily in Judith's arms, complaining of feeling tired and wanting sleep.

Be cheerful! The champagne corks were popping; the contents of the hamper were spread upon the table. Tom was talking to him about his exchange, and he was answering, but saying the wrong thing apparently, for Tom laughed good-naturedly at his answers. Dr. Dick and Cicely were chatting; Edith Dare was very silent. What was it she had said to him a week or two ago?—"The whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain." That was not true. The sun shone on the just and unjust; the gentle rain watered the earth; spring followed winter, and summer spring; the green things put forth their tender leaves; the swallows cleaved the air; the fish leaped in the stream; the young animals gambolled; little children laughed and screamed and played; everything that had life enjoyed life—and Nature was perpetually warring against life. Oh, no, no; Nature assisted life—loved life, and most of all young life! Life was meant to be happy. It was happy. Be cheerful!

"Let us drink the Major's health in a bumper!" cried Tom, suddenly. They all drank health and life and prosperity to him; and there was that in their eyes as they drank and looked at him over their glasses that told him he was loved.

"God bless every one of you," he said, "you are good, kind people;" and he felt he had made a foolishly inadequate reply to their kind wishes; but he could not for the life of him add another word.

The conversation rattled on, and he fancied he was listening to what was said; but in reality, in himself

he knew that it was not so. He was seeing other scenes and hearing other sounds. He saw himself sitting in a large high room in an Indian bungalow, listening to a puny baby's wails and a nurse's crooning song; while from afar, through the silence of the night, came the strains of merry music. Little Jim had been but an infant then, a pale-faced, puling baby, who had been ill, very ill; but he had recovered. That was the way with children—down one minute and up the next. Many a time since then had he seen him suffering childish pains—restless, contented with nothing, unable or unwilling to eat his food; many a time had he seen him fall and bruise and hurt himself, draw in his breath, pucker up his face, remain so silent that he seemed to be choking, and then burst forth into a series of passionate or piteous lamentations. But he had recovered. He was so strong and full of life, so hearty—yes, and vigorous. Those who understood these things said he was the most healthy child in the parish. Then why argue thus? Why balance pros and cons and make himself miserable with vain imaginings—allow himself to be frightened at a shadow? Because he had never seen the boy's face quite like that before; the touch of his little hand had never seemed so hot; the flaxen curls had never looked so limp. Pooh! Dick had noticed nothing of all this, and Dick was a doctor, whereas he was not. He was but an ignorant, mopish, apprehensive fool, who, because he had felt disappointment at his child's reception of him, imagined his child must necessarily be ill! Be cheerful!

In the street outside the Salvationists were singing

joyful hymns; hymns he had listened to a hundred times, but had never before thought sad. "For we shall wear a crown; we shall wear a crown," they sang, "in the New Jerusalem!" What did that mean?—in the New Jerusalem?

Cicely and the others went to the window to look out; Edith Dare came towards him.

"He's got a slight cold," she said softly. "It must have been a disappointment to you not to hear him shout; but he was tired, poor little fellow, and Judith thought it best not to wake him. He was crying for you all the day, too; I tried to comfort him, but could not; he wanted you, he said."

Be cheerful! Diffuse sunshine on all around! Think how sorrowful frail humanity always must be, labouring under the heavy burdens it has to bear!

Dick went to fetch his pipe. He was a long time away; but Tom talked gaily about the battery and the battery's doings while the Major had been in London.

Dr. Dick came back at last, and when he and Tom were fairly launched upon a subject that seemed to interest them both, Jim crept out of the room and stole softly up the stairs.

"I've been fretting myself, Judith," he said, "about the boy, and I want you to tell me honestly if you think him ill. If so, we must face it and get him well again."

"Ill, sir?" she exclaimed; "not he. The young doctor's been to look at un, yer know." Her allegiance to her master was proof against all Dr. Dick's admonitions and injunctions.

"Has he?" asked Jim, quickly. "What did he say?"

"Nothin'," replied the inflexible Mrs. Foresight. "What could he say? Them doctors knows nothin' no mor'n I know. I say the boy has caught a bit of a cold, an' so he has. Look at him, kickin' his blessed little legs over the sheets. Does he look like a sick child? Not he!"

Her last words were almost drowned by the shouts of the Salvationists, who were now marching in procession down the street singing a glad anthem, "Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!"

"Allelulia," repeated little Jim, his eyes wide open staring at the lamp. "Army band sing, 'Allelulia,' daddee dear—'ee s'all wear er c'own.'"

"My boy," said Jim, bending over the cot and taking his chubby little hand in his, "my baby boy; try to go to sleep, there's a good little man. Are your bits of hands hot, my son? Just a little. But you'll be better to-morrow, won't you? and we will have a splendid game—you and I and little Cis."

"Daddee."

"What, sweet boy?"

"Boy 'ick—boy better to-morrow—hink."

"Yes, well again to-morrow."

"Army band sing 'Allelulia,' daddee, an' 'ee s'all wear er c'own."

"Yes, my boy, some day; but go to sleep now."

"'Anter see er pittty picter of er poor man cūmblin' down, daddee, 'cause his c'oss too heavy."

"No, no," said Jim, with a gulp in his voice; "not now, my boy, not now; you must go to sleep now."

Come, put your arms round daddy's neck and give him one sweet kiss before he goes."

The boy lifted up his little arms, Jim's grey head sank between them, and they closed about his neck.

Then, gently laying the boy back upon his pillow and stroking his curly head, with a muttered, "God watch over you," he turned away.

"Judith," he said, taking her by the arm, "he seems a little better now, don't you think? There is nothing much the matter with him, is there?"

"Lor, master dear," she answered, quickly, "don't ee fret a morsel now about him; he'll be his bonny self ter-morrer, never fear."

She adhered stoutly to her former opinion, that he had caught a slight cold which a few hours' "warm" in bed would completely cure. She had been accustomed to children, she said, from her youth up, and understood their ways better than a whole college-full of physicians. No misgivings shook the strength of her firm conviction that "nothin' actual ailed him;" and she was so resolute in this opinion that Jim felt comforted.

Even as she spoke the boy's eyes closed under the soothing influences of the hard hand that patted him so softly, and the deep voice that coaxed him to sleep with an occasional, "There's a brave little sodger; there's a brave boy."

"I'll come up again and see him before I go," he said, and, stepping high, he left the room, and crept noiselessly down the stairs.

He felt somewhat comforted, but still could not feel absolutely cheerful. Although he did his utmost to think of something else, harassing—and of course

absurd—questions continued to arise, tormenting him like fiends. He knew her honesty and fidelity so well. Was she really as confident as she seemed to be, or was she suppressing her real feelings for his sake? Again, she loved little Jim with a love hardly less than a mother's—and a sharp pang at his heart made his face twitch as he formed this mental comparison—was she then afraid to face the truth, or determined not to face it, until it was cruelly forced upon her? He could not tell; but of one thing he felt certain—she was setting him an example of fortitude and cheerfulness it would be well for him to follow. And yet the obligation seemed to lie upon his spirits like a weight.

The little party was now assembled in the drawing-room. Cicely and Tom were talking to him carelessly, but, it seemed to him, very kindly. Edith Dare and Dr. Dick were sitting apart engrossed in one another, apparently. With grave faces, they were talking in an undertone, and he thought that quick glances of admiration shot repeatedly from Dick's blue eyes. He was glad he admired her; Dick was his best friend on earth, excepting only Uncle Ben; and Edith Dare—but no wonder she looked pleased and animated; he was telling her, most likely, of Miss Dorothy Doyle.

But Dick, just then, was not thinking of Miss Doyle. He was saying: "There was a very dry spring, was there not, with a great deal of east wind, and then a hot summer and a long drought?"

Edith Dare answered that this had been so.

"And latterly," continued Dr. Dick, "you have had a good deal of rain?"

"Deluges," she said; "but tell me, Dr. Doyle, why do you ask?"

He looked at her very steadfastly, and lowering his voice to a murmur, answered—

"You are a brave girl with a sympathetic heart, Vraille tells me. Keep my secret; it is on his account I have been asking you these questions. That little boy of his does not seem well. I am troubled in my mind about him."

"Oh, don't say it's fever;" and she clenched her hands in the earnestness of her appeal; "don't say it's fever. There's so much of it about, I hear; and if little Jim—caught it, I think it would kill Major Vraille."

"I can say nothing to-night; to-morrow I shall come down early in the morning and look at him. Tell Mrs. Starling for me, please—but not a word to Jim; remember, I know nothing yet."

"Oh, poor fellow, poor fellow," she said, clasping her hands tightly together and entwining her slim fingers.

"You like him then?" Dick whispered, softly.

"I love him," she replied, naïvely, and he looked surprised. "I love him," she repeated, slowly. "Once, I only knew that he was a man to respect and honour, but now I see that he is a man to love as well. No one who has the understanding to appreciate him, no one who has the heart to feel, can help loving him. You do not know, Dr. Doyle, you cannot, how every one here loves him."

"But I do know," Dick replied, understanding now what she meant, "that he is too high, too great, too simple-minded, too tender-hearted for our work-a-day

world. I have seen him, Miss Dare, as fierce—fiercer than a lion; and I have seen him, too, as gentle as a lamb. A braver man than James Vraille never buckled on a sword or faced an enemy—he is a soldier from the crown of his head to the sole of his foot; but put him into the ordinary rut of everyday life and there he sticks, a shy, reserved, seemingly commonplace man, who has no desire to get on; place him in the world's crowd of busybodies, self-seekers, brain-suckers, back-stair crawlers, and he is nowhere—a nonentity, jostled about and pushed aside. He will never do himself justice—poor old Jim! he will never succeed; he *cannot* push.”

“But has he not already succeeded?” she asked, her eyes flashing with enthusiasm, “not, perhaps, as the world counts success, but——” and so they went on talking, going back over the old, old ground; each of them acquiring fresh knowledge of the past with every step, each of them vying with the other to do him honour; each of them, too, learning to know and like the other through and because of him whom they both admired.

But Jim knew nothing of it all; he could only sit alone, hugging his apprehension to his heart, yet rejecting it as poison. So far as he could tell, Edith Dare and Dick had taken a great fancy to one another, and he was glad.

“We’ll get her to sing to us,” said Cicely, and she went over to where they were sitting.

As Edith moved across the room towards the piano, he rose from his chair and met her. “Do not sing that sad song, to-night,” he said; “sing something cheerful.”

Dick had opened the piano, and was standing beside it.

One swift chord, and she began to sing, as the skylark begins, without prelude or introduction, and, as it seemed, from the very fulness of her heart. It was her natural expression—effortless, free, spontaneous. Her bosom rose and fell, her throat swelled, and the room was filled with the soft, sweet notes of Heaven's harmony. "She can sing the soul out of you," Jim had said, and Doyle had laughed. He was not laughing now, but listening, spell-bound. And Vraille was listening—listening to the song that seemed to soar to Heaven's gates, and in passionate yet sad appeal, claim admittance as its right; for of the world it was not, and had never been; it had shaken off its earthly bonds and had soared, soared up and away, to its natural home in the blue vault above, where all was peace and joy and forgetfulness of evil; and even as it waited there and sang on, its sadness vanished, and its pitiful lament became a cheerful anthem of thanksgiving. The gates opened and it was admitted.

And so the spirit of the pure must some day free itself of earth's restraint and spread its silver pinions—soar in white raiment through the dreary darkness, and sit at Heaven's gate, pleading for admittance to the light. But the song that it must sing must be the song of cheerfulness.

Edith Dare's voice trembled on the last long note, sank, and died silently away.

"Why, where's the Major?" Tom asked suddenly; "he was here only a moment or two ago."

"I expect he's gone up to the nursery to look at little Jim," said Cicely.

CHAPTER VIII.

NIRVANA.

THE lodging-house called Guildhall Villa was sadly silent. A visitor was expected; a visitor to whom paupers and kings alike must bend the knee, and treat with solemnest respect; a visitor who raps at every door, from the lintel of the cottage to the portal of the palace; the grim guest who must be entertained, whether he stands at the cradle of the infant or the bedside of one babbling in second childhood. It was, but the working out of the Inevitable Law—Nature's inexorable law, that swerves neither to the right nor to the left, and never flinches; knows neither mercy nor remorse.

In the midst of Nature's beauty and variety the gloom of the poor little household, cowering under the threatened decree, was but as a grain of sand in the desert of despair and desolation of the world!

The wheel of life revolves; night follows day, and summer winter; sorrow must follow joy, and joy sorrow. Nature smiles and frowns; now seemingly beneficent, now cruel; never vindictive—but always exacting the penalty of every mistake to the uttermost. The wheel of life revolves, and those who have erred through ignorance drop into the abyss beneath before their time has fully come; the rest live on—live on and

hope. And as they live, Nature presents to them her successive phenomena, beautiful and ghastly—all linked together and interdependent: the zephyr is followed by the blizzard, the warmth of summer sunshine by the lightning, the dew by the deluge, the growing of the flowers by the earthquake, the calm by the tempest, the light of day by the eclipse—plenty by famine, health by disease, life by death. The wheel grinds on eternally.

But how could Tom Starling, how could Cicely—how can any of us—be expected to pause and reason out these things? It only seemed to them terrible that such things should be as they were. Of life and death they knew nothing, except that life was sweet, death awful.

“Oh, I did not think he was so ill,” she cried, clinging to her husband’s hand as they sat together in their pokey little dining-room listening for sounds from overhead, yet hoping not to hear any. She was frightened; and even Tom was feeling a timidity he would not have confessed for the world. They were realising their utter helplessness. “I did not think he was so ill, Tom, or I could never have smiled when the poor, poor Major came back from London that night, and we drank his health, too, and laughed: Oh, I do wish we’d never done it;” and she put her arms round Tom’s neck and clung to him. “You’ll never get ill, Tom, will you? You’ll stand by me all through and never leave me, won’t you, won’t you?”

“There, there, little woman,” said Tom, comforting her; “I’ll never leave you; why should I? and I’m not in the least likely to get ill. Bear up, and be a

brave girl. Little Jim will very likely soon be right again ; children get well just as suddenly as they get ill you know. You must not be frightened at a little sickness in the house ; and we must think of them, not of ourselves."

"I know I'm very selfish ; I know I'm very wicked ; but, oh ! Tom, suppose it were little Cis. It might have been her instead—what should I have done then ? Major Vraile was right when he insisted that either she or little Jim must leave the house. He was not selfish when he arranged things so calmly for us, even in the midst of all his trouble, was he ?"

"No, Cis," said Tom, shortly ; "he is never selfish."

"How *can* he be so calm ?" she asked.

"Ah, I don't know ; perhaps it is that he has seen so much trouble in his time that he's got accustomed to it."

"He seems to walk more upright than he did when little Jim was well," she continued, talking, perhaps, that she might not think too much ; "and he holds his head so high that he looks stern and different to himself, and I feel frightened of him. He smiles at me, but never speaks."

"No," said Tom, "that's the worst of it—it's awful ; and I dare not, I simply dare not stop him to ask him questions. He's best let alone, poor chap."

"And Judith," continued Cicely, the tears springing to her eyes, "even now believes that little Jim has only caught cold in his throat and will get well."

"But does she really believe that, do you think ?" he asked.

"I don't know, Tom ; I don't know what she believes .

in herself; but she says she is certain he will be well again in a day or two. She will listen to nothing any one says—not that any one wishes to undeceive her, poor soul—but always will have it that he is better; and when Dr. Doyle said it was diphtheria, she laughed at him and told him she knew better.”

“Well, I for one, then, won’t ever tell her it’s diphtheria,” said Tom.

They discussed these things in frightened whispers, and tried to account for them, but could not altogether—no, not altogether. But Edith Dare, who sat silently in her attic next the nursery, waiting to render any service she could, felt that Major Vraille’s erect bearing and Judith’s incredulity were cruel signs of what, unless something unforeseen should happen, must follow later on.

She had waited there all the day, listening to Judith’s tramp upon the stairs, waylaying her, and imploring to be allowed to run her errands. The stairs were steep, and Mrs. Foresight had been treading them, day and night, night and day, almost it seemed without intermission. But her refusal was invariably the same. “No, no, miss, an’ thank yer,” was all she said; “I’m not tired, not the least in life. Time enough to rest when he gets well.”

Death, it seemed to Edith Dare, was fighting against three resolute and courageous antagonists. Patience was not wanting in Judith, fortitude in Vraille, or skill in Dr. Dick; if energy and perseverance could save the little life, it would be saved. It was a great battle, bravely fought; but would not their strength, if not their courage, fail them? And if death should

win in the end, what then? Judith's repeated assurance, "better, miss; much better," had been losing by imperceptible degrees its sturdy tones of confidence—was even she, at last, beginning to abandon hope? Dr. Dick's pleasant face had assumed a quiet look of stern composure instead of its accustomed smile—would his energy flag, his nerve fail, or his hand tremble? and Vraille, who waited and watched beside the child's cot, even as his dog, at that very moment, watched and waited at the doorstep in the street—what of him? Would nothing bend his head or penetrate the mask of his reserve? His spirit seemed indomitable, his courage undaunted. In doubt and apprehension he had been but a tender-hearted woman, and little more: now, he towered above them all—a man, a pillar of great strength.

Like the Starlings, Edith Dare felt her insignificance; but unlike the Starlings, she had often tried to reason out mysteries which seemed to her now more mysterious than ever. Why had she herself been so cruel as to mention the cruelty of Nature to him? It seemed as if Nature were now laughing at her in scornful derision. For the day was glorious. The noonday sun was shining on St. Dogwells, and shining with the self-same brilliancy on all that St. Dogwells contained, contemptible and grand alike—shining on Golden Hill and Guildhall Villa; shining on the medal that Vraille's servant was polishing in the verandah of Fort Gaunt outside the Major's quarters; shining through the window of the little room where the Major's child lay sick—sick unto death.

Its rays glinted through the half-closed blinds, and

fell, now upon the hard outline of Judith's rugged cheek, now upon the healthy bloom of Dr. Dick's; then upon the father's grizzled hair, then upon the fair white pillow and the baby's golden ringlets. The sun shone upon them all—the three grave faces bent over the little cot, the tiny pale one with the thin blue lips twisted by suffering out of the form of their former loveliness.

At a signal from Dr. Dick, Judith went to the window and drew down the blind.

Is a life to be sacrificed because a baby unwittingly drank poisoned water or breathed foul air? That little frame is frail and delicate; that little heart is absolutely innocent; that little life is the source of much pure joy and happiness; it is the core of a woman's heart, the light of another life—is it to go out? To tell us that wisdom grows from age to age, is no answer *now*, to say that man will learn, does not help us *now*. Nature cannot teach us; we must find out her laws for ourselves. For Vraille, who has so often balanced these great questions in his mind, it is a terrible conflict of head and heart, intellect and emotion, reason and faith. No fear has ever made him tremble before; and even now his head is up, his back is straight. One hand grasps the bed-post like a vice; the other rests upon the baby's head with a touch as soft as down; his eyes are filled with compassion, love, despair, but he does not utter a single murmur of complaint. Oh! it is pitiful! But Nature cannot listen; her ears are deaf to pity.

Who knows what conflicting thoughts were battling behind in the arena of the father's inner consciousness?

A half-stifled whisper, "Not now—not yet," which fell upon the air unheard, might well have been an answer out of the whirlwind to a still small voice feebly pleading in the far-off distance of the past—"Suffer me to come to Thee."

The whisper died away unnoticed, even in that silent room where the only sounds which human ears could hear were those of the sick child struggling for breath and the ticking of a watch—the fleeting beat of Eternal Time sadly marking the last feeble beats of Transient Life.

"Jim," said Dr. Dick's calm voice, as he laid the little hand he had been holding gently back upon the coverlet, "it is our only chance."

"Do as you think best—implicitly, I trust you."

Then Judith understood.

"Oh, no, no, no, doctor dear! Take your biggest knife an' stick it inter *me*, if yer will—but don't-ee, don't-ee, for the Lord's love o' little childer, touch my little Jim!" She pleaded with hard, tearless earnestness and one deep sob.

"Judith, my brave, faithful Judith, listen to me a little."

He who had railed at ignorance so often and so bitterly put his strong arm round her and drew her to him. "We understand you," he said, as tenderly as if he were speaking to his child; "we know you would suffer any torture for his sake. But that would do no good; this may. It has to 'be, Judith; it must be; it is my wish—my order."

"Forgive me, master: I forgot. Trust me once again. There, try me now."

He knew he could trust her—trust her better than he could himself. “Brave Judith,” he had called her. Brave, indeed; not a tremor—true as the steel which pierced the baby’s throat—steady as the doctor’s nerve which guided it.

A short interval of suspense—and then her reward.

“It has cured him,” she cried, the woman in her asserting itself in spite of her manliness, and sinking on her knees beside the cot. “Ah! praises be to God on high! my baby-boy is cured—see, master; see, Major dear, how easy-like he breathes!”

But he did not hear her. Lifting his eyes from the baby’s placid face he raised them up to Heaven, and for an instant his lip quivered. Then he held out his hand to Dr. Dick.

“Thank you, Dick,” he said simply, and sank into a chair.

Judith pressed the baby’s hand passionately to her lips and breast for a moment, and then thinking perhaps that any show of emotion was a violation of her promise to her master, she rose from her knees and stole silently from the room.

Edith Dare met her, and taking her quietly by the hand, led her toward the attic.

“I can see by your face, dear,” she whispered, “that you have time now to think of your poor self. Come into my room; I have brought you up a strong cup of tea and have kept it hot.”

Judith, the tears still trickling down her cheeks and without making any effort to dry them, allowed herself to be led into Edith’s room.

“I ain’t ’customed to cry,” she said when she was

composed enough to speak, "an' tears don't seem ter come nat'rally to my dry eyes, but all forced like and scaldin' hot. I ain't cried, miss, no, not since I were a girl no oldern you. But the sight o' my boy smilin' onst agin—to see un breathin' easy an' all comfortable and calm-like arter all his strugglin', an' real better arter all the weary waitin'—that made 'em come some 'ow. There, there; he's better—bless un; O God, bless un! so much better—an' I can dry 'em now, an' drink a sip o' tea if you'll 'scuse me, miss."

She drank her tea, a very little at a time, setting down the cup continually, forgetting even to stir it when Edith had helped her to milk and sugar, and talking all the time of the one subject that alone filled her mind and had filled it for years past—filled it full to overflowing for the last few days.

"I b'liev'd 'e 'ad a little cold," she said, "I *would* b'lieve it, 'cause if I'd listen'd to them doctors an' b'liev'd all they said instead, I'd been fit for nothing. They wanted to make me understand different p'r'aps, but what good would that a done? an' I couldn't, miss, I *couldn't*, d'yer see? I don't understan' their talk an' don't want; all I wanted was, 'ter see my boy get well, an' ter get un well, as master said, an' ter work my fingers to the bone for un—'cause 'e an' master's all I got ter care for in the world, an' when it pleases God ter take little Jim, it may please 'im ter take me too. I don't want'er live a day longer'n my baby-boy, 'cept for master if he wishes it."

In this incoherent way Mrs. Foresight partially explained the mystery of her unbelief. Edith, as she listened, felt strangely awed. Beside this woman's

ignorance how ignoble her own knowledge seemed to be; beside her devotion how paltry her own pride. She stroked the grey hair, and kissed the rugged cheek; she comforted and soothed and caressed the poor, sorrow-stricken soul, but with a feeling all the time that she would rather be kneeling at her feet telling her how she loved and respected her; how, instead of administering consolation, she ought to be receiving reproof at her hands for her own unworthiness.

"Yer see, miss," she said again, "I *had* ter run every blessed message for 'im myself; I *had* ter wait on 'im hand an' foot myself; I couldn't let—p'r'aps 'twasn't right—but I couldn't let any one, no not any one, do for 'im what I could do myself. Every grey hair in that head yer patten's his, every single one on 'em; an you'll please 'scuse me for 'aving——"

But Edith could stand no more. "Don't, Judith," she cried, burying her face in the old nurse's shoulder; "don't talk to me like that. You make me feel like a miserable impostor. I'm not worthy, Judith, to go down upon my knees before you and lace your shoe. It is a reverence I have never felt before for any one in all my life—except for one other—yes, one other, only one."

But Judith did not understand all this; it was beside the mark. She just looked at the girl for one moment and then went on, as before, talking of the boy, until at last she said that it was time to see how he was doing, and if he were asleep. "He is better," she said, "oh, ever so much better, an' 'if he'll only sleep, he'll be well again in a day or so, p'r'aps."

Poor soul! This time she honestly believed what

she said. She peeped in at the nursery door and saw Vraille and Dr. Dick standing by the window talking, and the baby in the cot lying fast asleep. She had time, then, to go and tell the Starlings the good news, and, with her hand in Edith Dare's, she and "the lady" who was so kind to her stole softly down the stairs.

Good news?

"I tell you honestly, Jim, my poor old fellow," Doyle was saying, "the chances are against us, but in that one, of course, must be our hope."

"Of course, of course," Jim answered very slowly; "we can but do our very best. I seem to see," he continued in the same quiet way, "that man's right arm alone wins him the victory, and that the chances are against him all along the line. Dick, we don't know, we don't know. I seem to have had my fill of suffering; but we don't know, we can only speak for ourselves. What is—what has been—what will be that poor woman's pain? If—if the boy should not recover, Dick, nothing will ever make her believe that he was not taken from her as a punishment for having loved him too much. That seems very horrible, does it not? The word 'vengeance,' " he went on, "should be expunged from the Bible. There is vengeance enough here on earth without our being threatened with vengeance hereafter. I am put here; I suffer; I love; and what I love is taken away. I don't believe in vengeance, Dick."

It was the first time for many days that Vraille had said so much, and Dr. Dick seemed surprised to hear him speak at all. He looked into his face and

missed all its old fire and enthusiasm, though its earnestness remained; he tried to say some kind words of hope and reassurance, but they seemed to die on his lips, still-born. The man to whom he was speaking was so terribly calm and dignified that he appeared to be exalted above the reach of human sympathy and comfort. The expression of his features was as tranquil as that of the child's sleeping peacefully in his cot, but the face was that of a man who had suffered all forms of sorrow and disappointment and could suffer no further; not hopeless exactly, for determination and perseverance were written in every line, but filled with a sort of sublime pity, an ineffable compassion, that fell little short of blank, but grand, despair. Physically the last few days had worked a great change in him: his back was straight, but evidently straightened under an effort; his lips were thin and colourless; his eyes shone with an unnatural lustre; his grey hair was now very nearly white; and his whole demeanour betokened great strength tottering to a fall.

They were standing side by side at the window gazing out upon the distant sea. The sun's rays were no longer falling on the baby's bed, but all along the rippling water they danced and leaped, laughing beautifully, out, far and away, to the horizon, where they kissed the sky.

"I know it, I feel it," he said, speaking under his breath, as if in a sort of dream, "I have felt it coming upon me for days past, with a slow, terrible conviction, —you think my boy must die."

"Not necessarily," Dick began; "if we can keep the tube clear—" and there he stopped. He was a man

naturally cool and collected, and, as a doctor, disciplined to look upon sad sights and scenes with composure; but the momentary look of hope in the grave eyes bent upon him, and its sad transformation into the old one of calm resignation, touched him more than any lamentation he had ever heard, and again killed the hopeful words upon his lips. "We shall all do our best," Vraille replied; "we can do no more;" and he looked out at the water again.

"Look at that great sea," he said presently, "a calm lake, the emblem of life and light and power; the Infinity of space and time. Think of the finality of our poor, weak selves—the rivers of human life running down to the Ocean of the Infinite—for ever; to be absorbed into that placid bosom of the Eternal. Tell me, Dick, do you really think that any living man could honestly thank God for taking from him his little Jim?"

"Jim—Jim, I don't know—I don't know."

"No," continued Vraille in the same slow, dreamy way, "we do *not* know; we should not pretend we do. We are but as a shaving driven on the crest of a wave—borne by a current; onwards to that ocean, and there lost to human sight for evermore. No man has retraced his course—no Columbus, Dick, has voyaged back. We are as and what we are. God help us!" He paused again, his eyes still fixed upon the dancing water, and then went on, "The bitterness of death will have very little sting for me; I seem to have passed through the valley of its shadow"—he spoke of the child's life as if it were his own—"and you will know that at such a time I could say nothing but what is in my soul to say. I have suffered—suffered until I

think I have no more capacity for suffering, and yet the heaviest blow of all has not yet fallen. I have been so moved to pity by the things I've seen, that the bowels of my compassion will, I think, if I outlive this last ordeal, go out for evermore to the whole world, which, I can see now, is full, full of sorrow—much of it, most possibly, far greater than my own. I am thinking, Dick, of one object of the profoundest pity until my heart melts within me, and feels as mobile and fluid in my frame as that ocean at our feet. It goes out to her who is the mother of my boy: she was once my darling wife; and, after all, I thank God she has been spared *this*. And if there be a God; a Great White Throne and a Judgment Seat; and an Infinite Mercy in that judgment, as we are taught to believe there is, may her forgiveness in that Great Day, when, we are told, there shall be a great august crowd whom no man can number—may her forgiveness then be as full and free as mine is of her now. And I would wish, Dick, that you would tell Miss Dare this—afterwards. Leave me now; go down and get some tea or something; leave me alone with my boy—I want to think."

He sat down by the child's cot, to wait patiently for him to wake.

Many a time had he seen the boy asleep before; often and often had he watched at his bed-side; but never, perhaps, had he felt so utterly alone with him as he did now. There, in a corner, where very likely the boy had thrown it, lay a half-open picture-book which he had shown him a hundred times, telling him the same absurd stories out of it over and over again, laughing to hear him laugh. How sad every word of

those absurd stories seemed now—how mournfully came back the echoes of that laughter! In many places on the walls, about two feet from the ground, were pencil marks which little Jim had made, and had been scolded for making, and were, as he had always explained, “on’y letters to daddee.” And there lay a little shoe; he had often buttoned that little shoe on the boy’s foot, but never before had its awful emptiness struck him—it struck him now. He could remember buying that pair of shoes, choosing them for their thick soles rather than for their general elegance; he could remember how pleased little Jim had been at wearing them for the first time, and how, as the little chap held his hand and toddled along at his side prattling about them, he had kicked up the dust with them; and then—yes, he could remember that happy afternoon distinctly—how he had told him that he was not to kick up the dust, and how the boy had persisted in his disobedience until, at last, he had tripped and fallen, and picked himself up again, clapping his chubby palms together to rid them of the dirt, but had never even whimpered until an hour afterwards, when he suddenly discovered a minute scratch upon his knee, which instantaneously produced a flood of tears. Ah! those were very, very happy days. Were they gone now, never to return? Would he never hear that baby-voice again, cooing so happily, crying so piteously, laughing so heartily, chuckling so pleasantly, and ordering his “daddee” about so dictatorily? Oh! they were gone, they were gone, they were gone—best not to let his eyes wander round the room filled with recollections that threatened to unnerve him; best fix

them on the boy himself, while the boy was yet with him—asleep, sound asleep, lying on his side; and his dear face turned, as it always had been turned, towards his father; respiration easy, expression calm and tranquil, lips pink once more, arms and hands and fingers outstretched, lassitude and repose in every limb. Nature was fighting on their side; she loved life, especially young life; she cherished and fostered it; she only needed to be understood and helped to win; and if that were all—ah! she would have help, help to the uttermost.

It was not meant that those dear arms should never again cling round his neck, that that sweet breath should never again fan his cheek, that that dainty little mouth should never again form itself into a rosy pout for him to kiss. No; it was not meant—for even now he could hear the little voice calling to him, as it seemed, from the far, far distance, “daddee dear,” saying the words so softly and so sweetly—lingering over them as if it loved them, and growing fainter and fainter until its sounds were whispers—very soft—and as he listened very intently yes, very intently he fancied he could hear it repeat with its pretty lisp “’uffer me to come er Thee” and it laughed its quiet little laugh and the laugh died died slowly and very softly

The man was worn out; he had not slept for many days; he had known no rest of mind till now, and his chin had fallen upon his chest, but not that he might sleep; scarcely had consciousness begun to leave him, when he started and looked up.

“Is it all over?” he said. “Is he dead?”

"Lor, sir, no, his blessed eyes is wide open lookin' at yer, an' his sweet lips smilin' honey."

The light rustle of Judith's dress had been enough to startle him. He thought it was Something Else.

Still watching. Time had passed, with its fears and anxieties, its doubts and its hope. All was going well, the doctor said, but asked that his little patient might not be excited. The Starlings came to see him and brought him toys to play with; but he did not seem to care for toys, and left them lying near his hand untouched. Judith came to see him, and he recognised her with a smile. He was better, Judith said, much better, and by putting her finger where Dr. Dick had taught them to do, she could understand his whispers. The dog was waiting on the door-step for his master; the father was watching at the bed-side of his boy. They were alone together, Judith having gone into the adjoining room, and the rest downstairs in obedience to the doctor's orders.

He was bending down over the cot. The boy was not looking at the toys before him but wistfully into his father's eyes.

"Dadd-ee," came the feeble whisper.

"My boy?"

"Got er cold . . . in er ffroat . . . take it off . . . daddee."

"There, there, little man, don't talk—don't try to talk; daddy'll do the talking, while you listen."

"Better . . . to-morrow . . . hink . . . daddee dear"

"Yes, better to-morrow; quite well again soon." He picked up a toy from the counterpane and tried to amuse the boy with it, but little Jim, after watching it vacantly for a moment or two, suddenly looked up in his face again, and whispered—"Daddee."

"What is it, my boy, my dear boy?" He placed his ear close to the little mouth.

"'Anter see . . . er pictur . . . poor man . . . cumb-lin' down."

Jim knew that Judith kept that picture in the old Bible on the book-shelf; he brought it to the child and laid it on the coverlet.

"That poor man," he said in a soft, low voice, "never really tumbled down, little Jim; He could not, He was too strong. He was such a good man, baby boy, such a good, kind, simple man, that others fell—not He—fell down at His feet to bless and worship Him for His kindness, and say how very, very sorry they were for Him, and how they would try, because they loved Him so, to be like Him. And they did try—tried very hard, some of them; but they were so weak they could not stand up always, as He had asked them to try to do, but often fell—fell down and hurt themselves. But He was more sorry for them than ever they had been for Him; and He lifted them up and put them on their feet, and kissed them, and wept over them, and helped them again and again and again, no matter how often they fell, or even if they fell on purpose, and was never once cross with them but always very kind, because He loved them so. But he never fell Himself, sweet boy; never—only they."

Little Jim, who loved a story, even though it were a


story he did not thoroughly understand, silently listened to this simple tale, his eyes wide open with interest and attention, and when it came to an end whispered thoughtfully, "Gain, daddee."

Jim told it him a second time, and at its conclusion added, "Perhaps, Jim boy, He will tell it you Himself some day."

"No, no, daddee tell it self—tell it 'gain."

He began to tell it again, but after the first few words, stopped suddenly, pressing his thin lips firmly together and clenching his teeth.

"Judith," he said quietly.

Judith came. 

"Call Doctor Doyle—quick."

She cast one terrified glance at the cot, and without a word sped upon her errand swiftly, borne on the wings of fear and love. She had seen him look like that before, and knew what it meant.

* * * * *

"What is it, Jim?" asked Dr. Dick as he came rushing into the room.

"I thought it was all over; but he is better now." He turned away and walked toward the window. Doyle watched him attentively as he stood there looking out at the sea, and then without speaking took his seat at the side of the cot and scrutinised the boy's face anxiously.

Still watching; but the watching was beginning to tell its own story upon the father's haggard face and jaded mien; even as time was telling another and

a happier tale upon the child's. The boy was playing peacefully with his toys; the father was once more standing by the window. It was the evening of just such another glorious day.

Out across the glittering waters the sun was sinking, down, down to his home in the placid sea; out far away in the west, where the crimson clouds, like a host of exultant spirits, were rising up to meet him and convey him to his resting-place in all the glory of purple and gold; out over the vast expanse of space and time did Vraille gaze with a calm face. Just such another day. Ah, his soul had been plunged in Hell; it had leaped with one great bound out of the black valley of despair into the Heaven of high hope—agonized; it was now resting tranquilly again on the bosom of Eternal Sea. He had reaped a great reward. The look of anguish on the poor child's face had been dispelled and replaced by another of intense relief and calm serenity by the magic of a man's simple action—that man himself.

The sun sank down and the golden waters danced; the child played on, watched over by Dr. Dick and Judith; the figure at the window turned to look at them—then back toward the sea again.

From the direction of Fort Gaunt, standing out in sharp relief against the sky, came the notes of a trumpet-call, borne gently on the breeze. It was *retreat*, the setting of the sun, the waning of the day. To-morrow and to-morrow and to-morrow—*reveille, retreat, lights-out!* Life was but a day, soon over; in death there was *no* sting, the grave could win *no* victory. If it were doomed that the boy should sleep, then he, too,

would wish to sleep, his spirit cradled in those tender arms, there to rest, on and on, and never wake again. It was well—so let it be. But if the boy were saved—saved that he might live, it was very well.

The sun was sinking fast, and here and there a star peeped out.

Any living man might say to himself that a hundred years ago he had never seen, had never even known of them. A hundred years ago this earth, its joys so called, its sorrows, its desolation and despair, for him were not; no terrible unrequited sympathies had stirred his heart; he had never realised the awfully mysterious isolation of man as he looked up to the heavens and saw the stars—the silent stars—and down to the earth and beheld the graves—the silent graves; he had never yearned to penetrate those mysteries into which the angels long to pry: he knew nothing, felt nothing, but was unconscious in his impersonality. Having lived, having seen, having felt, well might he exclaim—“Oh, give me that again!”

If the child were saved only that he might die—die, as it were, a second time—was it well? *Reveille, retreat, lights out*; not once, but a hundred times, day after day, day after day, making up the burden of the long, long day of human life—what then? A truncated cone, a broken column, a tree struck by lightning?—a man working hard, labouring with pick and shovel, digging a grave, and burying his frustrated hopes and the corpse of his dead desires out of sight—the old man dead, his ghost only visiting from time to time the scenes of his former life—the new man, propelled

through space and time by duty;—his isolation, his negation complete?

Reveille, retreat, lights out! Alone, alone, alone! Travelling on and on alone; but not for ever, no, not for ever. The child's tiny arm had been reached down to save; the little hand had been firmly held, and had led along a road of roses; the little dimpled finger was outstretched, pointing out the way, and soon, soon would be beckoning to follow. To practise good for its own sake, to gather up the fruits of experience and *pity* in complete self-abandonment, to be absorbed into that placid bosom of the Eternal without passion, parts, or personality. The calm lake of life and light and power, the source of all things, the light that lighteth every man who cometh into the world—Nirvana!

The sun was sinking, the earth would soon be dark, the waters black. Retreat had sounded some time now, lights out would come; and if, in the end, the little spirit were to merge and blend into his own, and the two be one, all in all, for ever evermore, it was still well. A smile, the first that had parted his lips for many and many a weary day, stole gratefully across the father's face, but faded sorrowfully away again as his eyes fell on Judith.

She had crept into the chair vacated by Dr. Dick, and was toying with the baby's hair, and talking to him cheerfully.

"Lalla loves yer," she said, "Lalla'll love yer all along. An' when yer go, sweetheart, yer'll take her 'long wid yer—won't yer, little Jim?—an' never think o' leaving her behind, 'cause she'd be so lonely-like without yer? None o' them relapses yet, as the doctors call 'em,

Major dear," she continued, looking round at her master. "The boy's me own brave boy, an' means ter get hisself again in 'bout a day or two. Look at Lalla once again like that, chick, an' jus' whisper, soft-like, so's not to hurt yer little self—whisper 'yes.'"

"Zes," whispered the boy, looking at her thoughtfully with his round blue eyes; "zes, boy 'erry 'ick—cold in his ffloat, hink; daddee took it off."

"Yes, daddee'll take it off for yer, sweetheart, daddee 'll take it off, an' Lalla'll take it off, and doctor'll take it off, an' then we'll all be well again ter-morrer." She had been softly smoothing his pillow as she went on speaking, and re-arranging his bed-clothes until there was not a crease or wrinkle in them that could annoy him, when she noticed the favourite print clutched tightly in his hand. "An' who gave the boy the pretty pictur, then?" she asked.

"Daddee; but er poor man neffer cumble down, Lalla—*neffer*."

Vraille's stern face smiled as it gazed out at the setting sun, fast sinking down, and preparing, as it were, to take his last long look of earth and blend into the sea.

He left the window, and seating himself beside Judith, put his arm kindly round her without speaking, and took one of the boy's small hands in his, and held it there.

The sun sank down; and presently, when they thought he might sleep again, there came a loud gleesome shout—

"Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!"

"Army Band sing 'Allelulia, ee s'all wear er crown,'" said little Jim.

"Lord, 'ow 'e do love them Salvationers, to be sure," said Judith. "There, hush then, dearie, hush, never mind 'em; try an' go ter sleep."

Dr. Dick muttered something about sending Tom Starling out to stop them, and went softly down the stairs a little way, where they could hear him whispering his injunctions over the banisters to some one below.

"Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!"

"Ee s'all wear er crown," came the feeble response.

Judith said, "Hush, dearie, hush-sh!"

Only Vraille said nothing.

The sun sank down, and the dark waters danced no more. The noisy chorus approached nearer and nearer, and then ceased suddenly.

"Army Band 'top!" The boy tried to sit up in bed. "Ee s'all wear er crown. Oh, daddee dear——" and he sank back into his father's arms with a sweeter smile upon his lips than they had ever worn in life.

* * * * *

Sing on, Salvationists, sing on! Seek to solve the silent mystery in your own noisy way, and may you win success! Take the Kingdom of Heaven by storm, if you can—Alleluia! There are some who cannot. Sing on, sing on; sing on—there is no need for silence now; there are no ears to hear, for they are deaf; no sense to feel, for sense is numb; no soul to save, for it has flown—Oh, Alleluia! The silver cord is loosed, the golden bowl is broken, the pitcher at the fountain is in pieces—Alleluia! A little voice is dumb for evermore—Alleluia! an honest heart is rent in twain—Alleluia! an upright back at last is bent—Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!

CHAPTER IX.

AN EPILOGUE.

Two years do not make very much change in a place like St. Dogwells, or go far either to establish improvements or redress grievances. There have been the usual succession of seasons, bringing rain, wind, sunshine, snow and frost, the usual rotation of crops, the usual indifferent harvests; but St. Dogwells is very much where it was. Fort Gaunt has been dismantled, and a new system of defence is about to be introduced; the walls of other public institutions have grown a trifle greyer, those of the public-houses a little greasier about the door-posts; the parish-pump has got a new handle, and the Salvation Army a new flag; but *ideas* have not advanced very much. Here and there a gap has occurred in a family circle, and different people are wearing crape, but others have gone back to colours again, so that that account with Time is fairly balanced. A fresh set of trifles has thrust its importance into prominent notice; old sorrows have disappeared, new ones have arisen; eyes that were wet are now dry; voices that were lamenting are now laughing. Joy and grief are playing at see-saw as they have done ever since St. Dogwells was peopled; but the amelioration of the human race as represented in the little town has not advanced by giant-strides.

The town commissioners are still arguing out knotty points amongst themselves, but the streets are no better paved or the houses better drained than formerly; the churchwardens are still at logger-heads, but their "congregations" are, seemingly, no nearer Heaven than they were. Mrs. Bompas throws a somewhat larger shadow on the roadway as she struts along the street, with her nose disdainfully in the air and the weight of her purse threatening to tear the pocket out of her dress. Doctor Spill still remembers the dinner-party at her house, when he warned young Starling of the danger of having a cesspool in the garden, and is fond of telling the story to any one he can find not too busy to listen to it; but, for all that, it is still there—and so is Guildhall Villa, furnished on the outside with a coat or two of fresh paint, and in the inside with a fresh set of lodgers, who have their experiences of St. Dogwells society to come. Colonel Taplow still cackles, and is still looked upon as a dependable man for news. Mr. Little and Mr. Brand are still striving to prop up the Church with doctrine, and knock one another down with dogma; they still hold firmly to their respective creeds—High and Low, of which the principal article in each seems to be, as heretofore, *not* to believe in one another. Only once, since they first began to officiate in adjoining parishes, have they ever found themselves able to agree upon any definite point, spiritual or temporal; it was when they discovered, severally and distinctly, that a certain Major Vraille, who lived for some time in Fort Gaunt under suspicious circumstances, and eventually died there, was an infidel, an unfaithful servant, an un-

regenerate sceptic, and that he died in his unbelief, refusing the means of grace, and, in their opinion, at heart an Atheist (with a big A). They had both of them endeavoured to pluck him as a brand from the burning at the eleventh hour. But instead of listening, he had argued—actually asking Mr. Brand whether it were not a cruel, or, at any rate, a foolish thing to tell a child ghost-stories just before sending him into a dark room alone, and begging Mr. Little who followed, to purge himself of cant, and think, if he earnestly desired to enter into the sorrows and perplexities of other people, and to strip a simple story, sublime in its simplicity, of all fantastic corollaries, if he wished it to appeal to a dying man. The recollection of these things is still green, not to say tender, in the memories of both reverend gentlemen, as a subject forming neutral ground upon which each can walk without fear of treading on the other's toes. But since that auspicious occasion, as before it, they have, upon most other topics, been as much at variance as ever. Yet are they both still right—each conscious of his own rectitude; both still wrong—each well aware of the other's faults and foibles; each still endeavouring to point out to the other the error of his ways; each still unable to make up the internal differences that exist amongst the members of the flock penned in his own fold. The spiral ascent of progress is as hard to climb at St. Dogwells as elsewhere, and St. Dogwells is very much where it was two years ago.

There is no more in St. Dogwells now than there was then to induce strangers to visit it, and just as much

leisure on the hands of the St. Dogwellites to notice and make remarks upon any who do. The arrival therefore of a gentleman, a lady, and her maid, at the Spread Eagle to spend a night or two there, has created a certain amount of comment amongst the humbler inhabitants of the place, especially as the names of the visitors are remembered by some as having been connected with an episode which caused a tremor of emotion to pass through the town some two years or so ago. A father and child had died of diphtheria almost at the same time, during the rainy autumn succeeding the driest summer ever known of late years in those parts, and had been buried in ~~the~~ same grave; and, it was remembered, too, that in life they had been devoted to one another;—rather a sad sort of story on the whole. The gentleman had paid his bills very regularly, and had been a kind gentleman; always seeming to have something in his pocket for the poor, and never saying an uncivil word to those beneath him, though it was believed he had a reputation for being a bit hoity-toity with his equals; and the child, a dear little boy, with pretty little manners, well-brought up, and nice-looking too.

St. Dogwells—the true-hearted, unimportant part of it, that which worked most and talked least—remembered these things with a sense of sadness, and when the little party from the Spread Eagle, the day after its arrival, strolled leisurely along the street, shopkeepers and cottagers nodded and smiled sympathetically at it, as if pleased to see it. When it reached the newly painted Guildhall Villa it stopped, the lady and gentleman standing side by side very close together,

and the maid (an old maid, rather, with iron grey hair and a hard, unprepossessing face covered with wrinkles) a step or two behind them. They all three looked up at the windows for a little while in silence; then the lady said something to the gentleman, and he rang the bell. The woman who opened the door to them invited them to step inside with smiles and hand-shakings. After an interval of half-an-hour they reappeared, and continued their walk through the town, stopping every now and again, while one or other of the ladies, usually the elderly one, recognised an old acquaintance to whom she wished to speak.

They reached the outskirts of the town in time, and turned up the Chatterley turnpike road, when the gentleman, addressing the elderly maid, said kindly, "Judith, won't you let me carry the box for you now? do, there's a good soul; remember, we have a good twenty minutes' walk before us." He was a pleasant-looking fellow, faultlessly and very neatly dressed, with an imperturbable manner and a somewhat indolent gait; not at all the sort of man one would expect to meet on a country-road carrying a largish cardboard box in broad daylight with a fairly warm sun shining overhead. Yet he seemed as thoroughly anxious to relieve the woman, whom he called Judith, of her cumbersome parcel as his self-contained demeanour would allow him to appear anxious about anything. He even reiterated his proposal three or four times; but Judith said she preferred carrying the box herself. "No, sir, please," she replied, in a respectful but determined way, "lemme do this little thing for 'em myself; maybe it's the last I shall ever have the

chance o' doing—little enough, poor dears, but somethin'; an' I likes to feel it's somethin', 'owever little."

"She'd rather carry it herself, Dick," the lady whispered, and they walked on in silence.

A bend in the road brought them in sight of a tall square stone tower surmounted by a pyramidal^c slate top, over which a brass fox swung slowly round on an axis passing through the pit of his stomach; his view was thus practically unlimited, and he could direct his attention to any point of the compass happening to lie up-wind, though, spitted as he was, he could not make that rapid progress towards it which the extended position of his neck, legs and tail indicated he certainly would do under any other circumstances. At present his head was turned pretty steadily toward the west, and his coat gleamed brilliantly in the sunshine against a background of thick foliage. He was the most conspicuous, and, perhaps, the most important part of the tower, the sole use of which, beside holding him and his information up to public view, was to support an insignificant bell with a still more insignificant tinkle; and the tower itself was the most conspicuous, though, of course, not the most important part of the parish church, of which it was the landmark and symbol. The church, standing as it did upon high ground among trees, with a cluster of white and pink cottages surrounding it, was picturesque enough from a little distance, but at close quarters looked old though not romantically antique, dilapidated without being interesting on that account, and seemed to wear an habitually melancholy and care-worn expression, due, apparently, to the studied neglect of mankind whose

treatment it had grown weary of lamenting, rather than to the buffets and ravages of wind and weather, whose insults were expected and consequently could be borne with comparative fortitude.

In that face of the tower which fronted the road was set à' clock, like a great eye, looking mournfully down upon the graveyard below, watching as well as marking the progress of time. *Hic jacet, In memoriam, Requiescat in pace*, were the solemn words it read—written all round about it on the ground, here, there, and everywhere, over and over again, in languages dead and modern; on marble, on stone, on slate, on wood; in letters of black, red and gold; freshly painted, newly cut, fading, blurred, almost obliterated, quite illegible; day after day, week after week, the old, old story, always being repeated, though told in a hundred different ways, and without a chance of it ever being forgotten.

Upon one stone it was told twice over, in characters just beginning to be a little moss-grown and green, but still sharp and clear enough to tell it with incisive force: two names, the same precisely, one a little below the other, with "father of" in between; two dates, separated one from the other by an interval of only a few days; two ages—oh! that was perhaps the saddest part of this particular story; that was where it differed so much from the rest; that was where the eternal moral, set forth with mournful monotony in a hundred other places, was here pointed with a two-edged barb of irony that cut both ways at once—a man in the prime of life, a baby who had scarcely begun to live!

The little party of three stood together reading it,

the women hand-in-hand, the man bare-headed, all with figures bending slightly forward and nearly motionless, all thoughtfully and reverentially silent. Their silence, as if respected by creation, remained undisturbed by any outside noise; Nature itself in that place was strangely still, and seemed to be resting.

For some little time not a sound broke the stillness of the peaceful air, save the crowing of a distant cock in some farm-yard, a mile or more away it might be, and the occasional contented caw of a rook in the trees beyond the church. Then, when a light breeze rustled through the cypresses and weeping-willows and made them bow their heads over those they mourned, startling a bird or two out of their foliage into the air with a half-frightened twitter, the young lady in the grey dress with the graceful figure and the pretty hair touched the gentleman standing at her side gently on the arm, and whispered a word or two in his ear. They then withdrew a little way apart, leaving the grey-haired woman alone, standing at the foot of the grave, her eyes fixed upon the reading on the stone.

Poor Judith! what was their grief to hers? They had seen her standing there on that very spot two years ago, her body twisted with the pain of having its living heart plucked out of it and flung with the earth down into that grave upon the little box lying on a larger one; a little child confined on the breast of its father, where it had often so tenderly and confidently laid in life. They could remember her low moans which had interrupted the service—indecorously, as some said,

who did not know what had gone before, or how earnestly she had pleaded to be allowed to be present to the very end—and they were wondering now, perhaps, as they wondered then, how any man could have read the hopeful words with such signs of hopelessness before him and not falter.

Poor Judith! what was their grief to hers? The fulness of her double trouble they had, very likely, never really known. It had stunned her, and she had recovered consciousness after it only to live on in the hope of soon being herself taken to the place where those whom she had loved so devotedly had gone before. Time had deadened her pain, but the memory of those things would never fade; she was among friends—friends whom her dear master had himself asked to be kind to her even as she had been kind to him, and they had more than fulfilled his trust in them—but they were not the old friends whom she would never, never see again in life; she was devoting herself to fresh duties and finding pleasure in them, but they were not the duties in which her whole soul had been wrapped up, as those of tending on little Jim had been. She was contented, quite contented with her lot; it had fallen in very pleasant places, and she was surrounded by thoughtful and considerate kindness, affection even; but her real life was buried in that grave with her “master” and little Jim.

These were the thoughts that had prompted them to step aside and leave her alone with her box of flowers and her memories. They watched her as she opened the box and placed the white flowers on the grave; they watched her sitting there beside them in

her black dress ; and they felt it a privilege that they had been able to be kind to her, and registered a vow in their hearts that, whatever happened, Judith should find a home with them and never be forsaken.

"I'll go to her presently, Dick, but not yet—not yet ! She'd rather be alone."

"Yes," he said quietly ; "let us go a little way away."

They retired and took a seat at a little distance on a flat slab of marble engraved with gilt letters, and after a silence of some minutes, he spoke again.

"It seems awfully sad, Edith," he said, "that poor old Jim should have died, but I have learnt to think that it was best so. His death ~~added~~ the last link to the chain of his devotion ; every detail seems summed up. Poor chap ! it was fitting that little Jim should repose on the breast of big Jim ; and what a big man he was, Edith ! To me, the picture of him is complete in *that*. It could not have been otherwise."

"I have often wondered, Dick, why he should have been singled out of all of us, and why the disease should have been so terribly rapid with him ;—he seemed to run where little Jim had walked. Why was it, Dick ? do you know ?"

He looked up quietly, and with a thoughtful smile, replied—

"Well, I don't know, of course ; but I may as well tell you now that I have always had a suspicion that he inoculated himself from his child."

Her eyes questioned his meaning.

"You remember that afternoon when Judith came rushing downstairs, saying the boy was just as bad as ever ?"

"Yes."

"And when we got up to the room, only a few seconds afterwards, he seemed all right? Well, I fancy—mind, I don't know, but I fancy—the tube had got blocked and that Jim had cleared it. You know the sort of fellow he was; he would not hesitate, or say anything about it afterwards."

Her eyes now gleamed with enthusiasm as she looked at him.

"Ah!" she exclaimed, impetuously, "it must have been so. That is what James Vraille would have done—that is the way James Vraille died! It was a death worthy of his life." "You are right; it could not have been otherwise."

"His death, like his life," said Dick, quietly, "was a lesson. He faced it, as he faced all things, with courage and with calmness."

"I used to think sometimes that the loss of his child would turn his brain."

"Edith, he was as sane as you or I: you should have heard him talking to those two parsons who came to see him; weak and helpless as he was, poor fellow, scarcely able to whisper, his moral grandeur made him a *Sul*-head and shoulders above the crowd of professed religionists; his earnestness, even, dwarfed them."

"He had very strange ideas upon many subjects."

"Not strange, I think, only natural, and, really, for the amount of reading and thinking he had done, very humble, simple and trusting. 'We don't know, we don't know,' he was always saying, whilst his *thoroughness* made him most intent on finding out all

he could know. When we were on service together, how he used to talk to me—poor fellow! to know him was an education. ‘We are so ignorant,’ he used to exclaim, too, with such sad earnestness.”

“Well, Dick, and what do you yourself think?”

“Just what he did—we don’t know, and never shall, perhaps; but, Edith dear, I don’t *think*, I *know* that if the great drama which Christ rehearsed for our instruction—feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, succouring the distressed and sympathising with the afflicted—be true, then I’d sooner stand on that Great Day in the shoes of Vraille’s ignorance than in the knowledge of others who boasted ~~that~~ they had called on Him by name. How can we advance that? How can we plant the standard of Truth an inch in advance of our generation? It requires more earnestness than I possess to go on striving after Truth which I feel all the time I can never find. But he, I believe, considered it a sort of duty imposed upon every man’s intellect to get as far as possible in the time allowed; and he used to say something about a man following the ray of his reason through the gloom of ignorance and fighting his way towards the dawn which heralded better things for the race if not for him.”

“That was what he meant, then, by wishing to leave behind him some monument to show that he had striven in the right direction. Oh! he has! he has!” she exclaimed. “I seem to see it.”

“In all ages there have been men,” Dick continued, his companion listening earnestly, “who have bared their brows to the blasts of popular prejudice, and have striven to advance that standard of Truth a

l. 95. Pins to adorn the hair were then called bodkins. (Elwin.)

l. 102. The criticism of Dennis, Pope's enemy, on this line is quite to the point. 'Who,' he asks, 'ever heard of a dead man that burnt in Cupid's flames?'

l. 105. Not fierce Othello, etc. See *Othello*, Act III. Sc. iv.

ll. 113, 114. Some thought it mounted to the lunar sphere,
Since all things lost on earth are treasured there.

Pope borrowed this idea from the *Orlando Furioso* of Ariosto, Canto xxxviii. stanza ii. Mr. Elwin remarks: 'From the catalogue which follows it appears that, by "*all things lost on earth*," Pope meant only such things as, in his opinion, were hypocritical, foolish, and frivolous. These mounted to the lunar sphere when they had finished their course here below,—a career very short in instances like the "tears of heirs," and, perhaps, very long in instances like the butterflies preserved in the cabinets of collectors.'

l. 122. Casuistry is the science of applying ethical rules to special cases. It often led to nothing but copious and inconclusive argument.

ll. 125, 126. Rome's great founder, Romulus, disappeared mysteriously from the earth, but was afterwards seen by a Senator, Julius Proculus, through whom he delivered a message to Rome. 'Haec locutus sublimis abiit.'

(Livy, i. 16.)

l. 129. Berenice dedicated her hair as an offering for her husband's safe return from the wars. It was afterwards placed in the heavens as a constellation. See the *Coma Berenices* of Catullus.

l. 133. 'The promenades in the Mall lasted till the middle of the reign of George III.' (Croker.)

l. 136. 'Rosamond's lake was a small oblong piece of water near the Pimlico Gate of St. James's Park.' (Croker.)

l. 137. John Partridge was a notorious astrologer contemporary with Pope. He was the victim of a joke devised by Swift, who professed to have discovered the date of Partridge's death from the stars. After the appointed day, Partridge anxiously and frequently protested that he was still alive.

he could know. When we were on service together, how he used to talk to me—poor fellow! to know him was an education. ‘We are so ignorant,’ he used to exclaim, too, with such sad earnestness.”

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little way; men who have sown in suffering what their children have reaped in joy—martyrs. And this is true in a minor degree of lesser men—men of whom the world has never heard, of whose heroism no one knows. Fame, and ‘fortune,’ as it is called, they have never had; and they may even have failed to realise any sustaining sense of the power of their own personal consciousness of rectitude. You know what I mean: they may be diffident before others and shy of themselves, lacking self-confidence, though imbued with a keen sense of duty. As a rule, those men don’t get on in the world, especially in the world of to-day, with its sensationalism, its love of theatrical effects and advertisement, all of which they look upon as shams, and resent as such.”

For a pleasant-looking, easy-going sort of man, who dressed carefully, considered his personal appearance, and appeared, to the outward eye, essentially the sort of fellow who “took things as they came,” this was a strangely incongruous speech; but the girl seated beside him—who had learnt, perhaps, to understand him better than the casual crowd—saw nothing to be surprised at in the fact of his having made it; she only looked at him admiringly, and replied—

“Yes, Dick, you are right; rewards were not for him—and, latterly, I don’t think he wanted any. I was vain enough once to think I understood him. I didn’t; none of us did; none of us could, most likely. I have even heard the Starlings say that they were not half kind enough to him, and they were very fond of him. Titles, ribbons, distinctions, Victoria Crosses; even if he had gained them, would not have lowered

Jim, but they could not have made him greater in my eyes. Poor, poor Major Vraille! That terrible night when he groped his way down the stairs he was going back to Fort Gaunt to die."

"Yes, Edith, and I think he knew it, though he never said a word to me about dying; only he set to work putting all his papers in order, and insisted on taking me entirely into his confidence."

"And to think that after all he had done for my father and for me he should have left me a fortune of my own."

"He never thought of that. His one idea was Judith: he wished Judith to be with you, and to die with the certainty on his mind that neither of you would ever feel the want of money. That was all; except that I think, if the loss of little Jim had not made a hole in his heart through which everything else fell, he might have learnt to love you, Edith."

She was silent for a moment or two before answering, and then said slowly—

"Dick, dearest Dick, he was far, far above me. If I could only have felt that I might have made his life one little bit happier than it was—but that couldn't be; he was beyond all comfort. Don't be jealous, Dick dear; I don't wish things changed, ever; and never shall—but I *did* love him."

"I am glad. Knowing him as we both did, loving him as we both did, feeling and sympathising for him as we both do; being, I firmly believe, better people for having known him, it could not be otherwise than it is: through him we met; through him we were bound together by a common interest; in

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him, as it were, we lived ; and because of him for nothing else, we must, we always shall, love another."

"Yes, Dick dear," she said.

They then talked a little about an "Aunt Dorothy," for whom they both seemed to have a great affection, until at last Edith rose from her seat and said, "I must go to Judith."

"Is there an organ in this church, do you know?" he asked, suddenly, as he rose with her.

"Yes, a fairly good one—why do you ask?"

"I'll go and see if I can find the keys and some one to blow for you," he said in his slow way, "and you shall play to us."

Accordingly he strolled off in the direction of the porch, leaving her to join Judith.

"Dr. Doyle has gone to find out if we can get into the church, Judith dear," she said, sitting down on the grave beside her ; "would you like me to play to you before you go?"

"Yes, m'm," said Judith ; "very much, an' would yer please play some soft, sweet music as angels might like to hark to—the sorter music I've 'card yer play many an' many a time when he"—pointing to the grave—"an' my darling was still with us, not 'zackly sad, yer know, but gentle like, as if I was, hushing a baby off ter sleep in my arms?"

"Yes, Judith, I'll try—will you come with us then, dear?" she asked, taking her hand and kissing her.

"Presen'ly, m'm, please, presen'ly ; I've just one or two things left to say to him an' little Jim, an' then I'll come. There's the doctor beckonin' from the

l. , the church is open. If you'll go on, m'm,
^{ime} e, an' play, I'll foller in one minnit."

^{ey} So Edith went, and presently the soft sweet music,
 , soft and sweet as even Judith could have desired,
 rose and filled the air, and fell again, and died away,
 only to rise once more, and so to rise and fall in the
 soothing swell of a lovely lullaby.

"Can yer hear it?" she asked, bending down and
 kissing the green turf, "can yer hear the sweet music
 lullin' yer to sleep? An' can yer hear Judith talkin'
 to yer, sweetheart, an' feel her arms pressin' down
 to yer, longin', oh! longin' to take yer inter them an'
 hug yer to her bosom once, only just—this once, afore
 she goes? Or, maybe, you are up above lookin' down
 an' crying to come to me, though I can't hear yer, an'
 it's best I shouldn't, for I could never bear to hear yer
 cry, least of all now, my darlin', my darlin', my darlin',
 when I could not come till it's His will to let me. Or
 are yer callin' kindly to me, tellin' me the time'll not
 be long—callin' to me with yer sweet voice, 'Lalla!
 Lalla'? Oh, Lalla'll come, little angel; she's ready
 now—an' then her grey hairs will be all gold like yours,
 an' her wrinkles will have been smoothed out, and her
 ugly face will be made beautiful, p'r'aps, as you'n is
 now, an' you'll love her, an' love her, an' love her, for
 ever. Don't-ee cry for her, baby pet, she'll not be long,
 now. The master said so, an' master never told a lie
 in all his life. The time'll not be long, he said, 'fore
 we all meet again; and the Lord love un for all his
 goodness to me, an' for kissin' me as he did when he
 was goin', an' for sayin' them kind words—mor'n for
 all the money he gave me, which is nothin' to me now

AN EPILOGUE.

So don't-ee cry, dearie: Lalla's happy, Lalla'll soc comin'. Good-bye, master dear, Judith's happy contented, as yer wanted her to be. Good-bye, baby boy, Lalla'll come. No need ter say, 'God be with yer,' now, as you're both of yer with Him. Good-bye —good-bye—good-bye!"

She rose from her knees, and stood looking at the flowers. Stooping down again, she plucked a daisy, and, opening her dress, placed it in her bosom.

Then she turned slowly away and walked toward the church, where the music was swelling—swelling, it seemed, into a ^hymn of praise; importuning—nay, demanding—admittance into Heaven.

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